Internet use for political mobilization: Voices of participants

by Noriko Hara

Abstract

The Internet has been used extensively for U.S. presidential election campaigns since the year 2000. In 2004, Internet campaigning grew to be more interactive than in previous years. The question of whether or not the Internet is making a difference in political outcomes has become noteworthy, and research efforts have examined political campaigns via Web sites, characteristics of the politically active population, and roles of the media. Among various campaign forces, activities organized by the online grassroots activist group MoveOn.org have become prominent. This article reports the voices of people who participated in political activities coordinated by MoveOn during the 2004 presidential election campaigns. The data were collected primarily through interviews. The findings contrast similarities and differences between participants in different levels of participation. Whereas most past studies focused on the macro level, this study is focused on the micro level. The article calls for further development of a theoretical framework for collective action facilitated via online and taking place offline.

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Introduction

For the 2004 U.S. presidential election campaigns, political parties, candidates, and other organizations used the Internet to mobilize voters and to promote candidates' positions (Jacobs, 2005). Internet campaigning became more interactive in 2004 than in previous years, especially through the use of blogs (Lessig, 2003). Shapiro (2003) and Welch (2003) reported that former presidential candidate Howard Dean actively used the Internet to communicate with the public and that his campaign developed rather sophisticated information and communication technologies (ICTs) to make connections with potential voters and to promote his vision. For instance, the Dean campaign used the Web site Meetup.com (<http://www.meetup.com>) to encourage his supporters to voluntarily organize face-to-face meetings. Joe Trippi, Dean's campaign manager, called it an "Open Source Campaign" because, for example, most campaign strategies were open to the public (such as how much money needed to be raised) and contributions were made by volunteers distributed across the country (Trippi, 2004). In other words, the Dean Internet campaign efforts were largely passive — campaign leaders renounced control, sat back, and allowed Internet support to happen, which empowered Dean supporters. Yet, "it [Dean's use of the Web] remains too little understood." [1]

Another campaign force during the U.S. 2004 presidential election was the online grassroots activist group called MoveOn.org (<http://moveon.org/>). Some scholars have compared the Dean Campaign and MoveOn to analyze how these grassroots groups presented novel ways of mobilizing voters (Chadwick, 2007; Welch, 2003; Jacobs, 2005). Despite intensive use of the Internet, both the Dean and MoveOn campaigns were ultimately unsuccessful (i.e., their candidates did not win the election), causing some to cite an over-reliance on the Internet (Shirky, 2004).

A study of Internet use during the 2004 campaign reported that the majority of the population still relies on television as its main news source, though more people are turning to the

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Internet to gain election news compared to previous years (Rainie, *et al.*, 2005). According to the UCLA Center for Communication Policy (2003), the number of users correlating increased political power with Internet use increased from 24.5 percent in 2002 to 39.8 percent in 2003. Of course, technologies in and of themselves do not foster productive civic engagement. Technologies may create opportunities to participate in political activities. However, little is known about the experiences of people who participate in Internet-powered political activities. As with the Dean campaign, how MoveOn operated during the election is virtually unknown. This article presents a study that investigated the following question: How do citizens participate in political mobilization through an Internet-based grassroots organization?

Internet use for political activities

There are several competing theories when it comes to discussing whether or not the Internet is making a difference in political outcomes (Bimber, 2001; Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002; Weber, *et al.*, 2003; Wellman, *et al.*, 2001). Empirical studies tend to focus on the analysis of political campaigns via Web sites (*e.g.*, Klotz, 2005; Xenos and Foot, 2005), characteristics of the populations who engage in on- and offline political activities (*e.g.*, Rice and Katz, 2004; Weber, *et al.*, 2003), and the role of the media as a source of voter information (*e.g.*, Rainie, *et al.*, 2005). Likewise, Looney (2004) lists various activities including information dissemination via Web sites, e-mail lists, blogs, and computer-mediated gatherings, facilitated by the Internet during the 2004 U.S. presidential election supporting the idea for the Internet's potential to increase civic participation. However, empirical research as to how the Internet might influence political participation is scarce.

Some scholars assert that the Internet can impact political activities through mobilization (*e.g.*, Wellman, *et al.*, 2001; Weber, *et al.*, 2003). In fact, the number of grassroots political activists has increased tremendously (Wayne, 2000). Bennett (2003), in particular, suggests that the Internet could be beneficial to resource-poor organizations that do not traditionally have access to mass media outlets. Several scholars (*e.g.*, Chadwick, 2007; Jacobs, 2005; Kern, 2004) have written about Internet-powered grassroots mobilization during the 2004 U.S. presidential election.

Garrett (2006) draws from the literature on social movements and discusses how ICTs facilitate mobilization in three ways. First, as many scholars assert, ICTs help reduce the cost of distributing information as well as the cost of participation. ICTs offer inexpensive means to disseminate information via activist organizations' Web sites (Almeida and Lichbach, 2003), Indymedia.org (<http://www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml>) (Kidd, 2003), and blogosphere (Kahn and Kellner, 2004) without filtering. Second, Garrett (2006) identifies the promotion of collective identity, the idea that participants are a part of a larger community and that participants share similar concerns, as an advantages of ICTs. This collective identity becomes a driving force to mobilize participants for collective action. Third, intertwined with the promotion of collective identity, Garrett mentions that ICTs foster community development. He cites Diani (2000): "new ICTs provide the largely passive support base with a low-intensity forum for issue-based communication." [2]

Bimber, *et al.* (2005) contend that the traditional theory of collective action needs to be reexamined in a context where ICTs play a major role. One of their compelling arguments is to conceptualize collective action as boundary crossing from "a private domain of interest and action to a public one." [3] In other words, ICTs can help bridge public and private spheres much more fluidly than could be done in the epochs when ICTs were not readily available. Bimber, *et al.* use the blogosphere as an example to illustrate the blurring of public and private spaces; many blogs publish personal journals to public space. This conceptualization is a first step toward examining collective action facilitated by ICTs.

Whereas the majority of past studies have examined large-scale survey data to generalize findings, studies of Internet-based grassroots organizations from participants' perspectives are scanty. This article begins to address questions regarding the role of the Internet in political activity and presents an empirical study of how citizens have participated in political activities organized by the online grassroots activist group MoveOn.org. This study collected micro-level qualitative data.

Methodology

Research site

The selected research case is the online activist group called MoveOn, founded in 1998 by Joan Blades and Wes Boyd, two activist entrepreneurs from Berkeley, California. In 1997, Blades and Boyd sent 100 friends an e-mail in which they petitioned signatures in support of stopping then-President Bill Clinton's impeachment hearings. They hoped that people would 'move on' to more important national issues. After collecting roughly 300,000 names, Blades and Boyd created an e-mail list to try to influence the 1998 mid-term elections. Although the outcome of their efforts was disappointing, these co-founders developed a Web site

(<http://moveon.org/>) to attract new members (Wolf, 2004).

MoveOn calls people who register with MoveOn's mailing list 'members.' MoveOn's membership grew from 300,000 to 2.3 million by 2003. As Bimber, *et al.* (2005) point out, membership in ICT-driven collective actions is not like traditional membership in which members pay dues, but rather tends to be less committed and more flexible. There is no membership fee to become a member of MoveOn (Chadwick, 2007). During the time of the study (from October 2004 through January 2005), the MoveOn.org Web site claimed more than 2.7 million members and raised over 30 million dollars.

MoveOn has been involved in various activities related to social activism. Perhaps most famously, in 2003 it was involved in promoting collective action against the war in Iraq (Kahn and Kellner, 2004). Through its coordination with other international peace organizations, demonstrations against the Iraq war were organized throughout the world, the high point of which occurred when approximately ten million people demonstrated globally on 15 February 2003 (Boyd, 2003; Hands, 2006). It was reported that the Internet played a major role in facilitating the mobilization of this massive social action (Lee, 2003; Packer, 2003). Over the years, MoveOn has encouraged members to write letters and make phone calls to political representatives about issues ranging from public broadcasting and gun control to the environment. MoveOn solicits donations, organizes bake sales and film showings, and encourages its members to work on elections.

MoveOn was chosen as the focus of this study largely because, as a new form of activist group that is supported by the use of the Internet, the organization's activities had been widely covered in mass media. The number of articles about MoveOn which appeared in major newspapers worldwide was ascertained by using the Factiva database, which indexes over 10,000 sources including major newspapers (*e.g.*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Financial Times*); transcripts from TV and radio programs (*e.g.*, NPR, BBC, ABC); and popular press magazines (*e.g.*, *Economist*, *Time*, *Newsweek*) from 152 countries (Factiva, 2006). **Figure 1** illustrates the number of articles published about MoveOn between August 1998 and April 2005 in three-month intervals. There was no major newspaper article about MoveOn before August 1998, although the organization's activities started in 1997. In 2003, five years after its inauguration, major newspapers began actively reporting about MoveOn. By that time, MoveOn was involved in the anti-Iraq war movement and had begun to focus on the 2004 election. The highest peak of traditional media coverage about MoveOn occurred between August and November 2004 (*i.e.*, right before the 2004 presidential campaign).

Figure 1: Numbers of major world news and business publications about MoveOn: 1998–2005.

According to a report by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (2005), 22 percent of Howard Dean activists visited MoveOn's Web site. MoveOn's strategy for using ICTs has an interesting trait — not only does the organization utilize online communication tools, but it also uses additional technologies to connect people with social activism in the physical world. As Wellman, *et al.* (2001) identified, the line between online and offline space for social interactions is often blurred. The particular case examined in this paper, MoveOn's activities surrounding the 2004 U.S. presidential election, included a campaign to support Democrat John Kerry for President, the so-called Leave No Voter Behind campaign. This effort included approximately 500 paid staff in 22 political swing states and involved identifying 10,000 key neighborhoods and recruiting of volunteers through "community meetings." The goal was to

“produce 440,000 new voters for Kerry in the most important swing areas.” [4]

Data collection & analysis

This study analyzed interview data from 15 U.S. informants between October 2004 and January 2005. The study began with convenient sampling of MoveOn participants, and additional informants were recruited using “snowball” sampling (Babbie, 2004). Data collection ended as theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was achieved. The sample size is rather small but includes a wide spectrum of participants from two swing and two non–swing states in the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign. MoveOn’s strategy was to focus on political swing states in which undecided voters could “swing” the election results. In non–swing states, voting trends were generally determined before the election. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the informants. The participation level indicates how active the informants were during the 2004 presidential campaign.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of informants					
Pseudonym	Gender (M/F)	Age	State	Member since	Participation level
Amy	F	25–34	Swing	1998	Paid staff
Carol	F	45–54	Non–Swing (R) ^a		Active online member
Emily	F	25–34	Swing	2003	Paid staff
Greg	M	25–34	Non–Swing (R)	2001	Passive member
Jackie	F	25–34	Swing	2000	Volunteer organizer
Ken	M	45–54	Non–Swing (D)	1998? ^b	Active online member
Lucy	F	45–54	Non–Swing (R)	2002 or 2003	Active online member
Mary	F	45–54	Non–Swing (R)	2001/2002?	Active online member
Naomi	F	65–74	Non–Swing (R)	2003	Active online member
Natasha	F	35–44	Non–Swing (R)	2001/2002?	Active online member
Phil	M	55–64	Swing	1999	Volunteer canvassing
Rachel	M	45–54	Swing	2003/2004?	Volunteer canvassing
Scott	M	25–34	Swing	2001	Volunteer organizer
Wendi	F	55–64	Non–Swing (R)	1998?	Active online member
Zack	M	25–34	Swing	2003	Paid staff
Note: a. Non–Swing (R) refers to a non–swing Republican state whereas Non–Swing (D) refers to a non–swing Democratic state. b. ‘?’ indicates the uncertainty of the information provided by the informants.					

In non–swing states, a passive online member (who was on MoveOn’s e–mail distribution list, but did not take political action) and seven active online members (who were also on MoveOn’s e–mail distribution list and who engaged in some activities based on their e–mail solicitations) were recruited. In swing states, seven MoveOn members who participated in the “Leave No Voter Behind” campaign called active offline participants were recruited. Of those, four were volunteers and three were paid staff (see Figure 2). Unfortunately, only low–level paid staff (those who supervised volunteer organizers) were willing to participate in the study.

Figure 2: Different participation level of informants.

Each interview, conducted either in person or by phone, took 30 to 60 minutes, was tape-recorded and later transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured [5], allowing the author to ask additional questions as needed. All the informants' names presented in this paper are pseudonyms. In addition to the interview data, interpretive content analysis of e-mail messages generated by MoveOn staff between 1 August and 2 November 2004 (63 messages) was conducted, the main purpose of which was to triangulate the interview data generated by informants, rather than by MoveOn staff.

The data were analyzed holistically and indexed by categories (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995). Interview transcription and interpretation utilized the constant-comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Themes inductively emerged from the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Throughout the coding process, themes noted during the fieldwork were confirmed and additional themes identified. While a number of themes emerged, only the three most prevailing themes are reported here.

Silverman (1993) suggests two forms of validation of qualitative research: triangulation and member-checking. In the present study, triangulation was accomplished through data sources (*i.e.*, informants from different states) and data collection methods (interviews and e-mail messages). Member checking involved asking the informants who participated in the study to examine the interview quotes along with interpretations of these data to check for accuracy.

Findings and discussion

Three primary themes emerged from the data: participation, sense of community, and empowerment. The level of activities undertaken by MoveOn members during the 2004 presidential election varied, depending on levels of participation.

Participation

The informants in non-swing states generally stated how MoveOn made it easy for them to become active:

"They [MoveOn] make it real easy, that's what I like. They're like 'Here's what we are doing now,' if it's a simple thing that I can do right then and there, like I say, the calling, the e-mails, I tend to do that. If it's more, I try, I really believe in the phone things that they are doing and getting together to go to other states. But my schedule just hasn't allowed me to take off and do that ... . But I respond to what I can because they make it easy to do that." (Mary, personal communication)

Mary emphasized the 'ease' of participation. Lucy also commented that MoveOn's e-mail messages triggered her to act on issues. Lucy testified that she responded to MoveOn's

solicitations 70 per cent of the time, declaring 'they've actually made me more politically active.'

Although one informant self-described his role as being an 'armchair activist' (Greg, personal communication), the informants tried to find time to participate in the activities suited to their interests, confirming the Internet's tendency to reduce the burden of participation in political activities, as mentioned in the literature (*e.g.*, Bennett, 2003; Klein, 1999).

Other informants sought to contribute considerably more than merely being 'armchair activists.' Lucy, who participated in calling activities facilitated by MoveOn, was typical:

"I helped with the election just one night. I contacted voters in Ohio, basically I just followed the instructions on MoveOn to see who they were voting for ... . And, then, they were going to follow up with Get Out the Vote-kind of thing." [6]

Another informant shared her experience of going to a movie that was advertised through MoveOn:

"Another thing that I liked about it was that it's a lot of things, like documentaries, you know, the Michael Moore thing on 9/11, *Fahrenheit 9/11* ... . I was there opening night and so were some of the people from my office. We had maybe like eight or nine people from my office going, and it was I think primarily because of the Web site that brought it to our attention. You know we all basically organized after that." (Natasha, personal communication)

Mary also commented on the wide variety of activities that MoveOn organized:

"I like, again, the uniqueness. It's not just about sending e-mails, making phone calls, writing letters to the editor and that kind of stuff. They have found other ways to bring people together, which is the way that you get more people ... even though the majority of the stuff tends to be your usual ways of getting out, but there is that variety of opportunities that might appeal to people that won't do the other." (Mary, personal communication)

Moreover, MoveOn appeared to target the younger generation's political participation. Greg, a passive member, remarked: 'MoveOn I think has given a face particularly to a lot of young people who don't necessarily agree with the administration.' The literature reports that the Internet is a driving force for attracting the younger generation to participate in politics (*e.g.*, Carpini, 2000). This study's interviews with participants in the Leave No Voter Behind campaign were consistent with this finding. The informants all mentioned that most of the organizers hired by MoveOn were in their 20s and 30s. For example, Amy shared her observation of one of the training sessions [7] for newly hired MoveOn paid staff:

"Judging by sight ... 80 percent of the people were probably 20 to 30. And then there were probably 15 percent of the people who were 30 to 40, but a lot of those people were state directors and lead organizers, at a higher level. And then there were a handful of people who were older, who were like in their 40s and 50s, but that was a much smaller number, like you could almost pick them out individually from the crowd."

Jackie shared similar comments when recruiting volunteers for the campaign:

"I have a lot of friends who are single, or don't have families, and have disposable time on their hands. I had a lot of people that I could have volunteering with me. Where maybe people who are older, have families, or whatever, just had a harder time recruiting volunteers, but for me it was really easy."

Amy made similar comments "I'm 25 and I can put my life aside, because I'm in that place in my life where I'm able to do that." This observation that MoveOn members tend to be younger was confirmed by the impression reported by Chadwick (2007).

On the other hand, the canvassing volunteers interviewed commented that although paid staff for MoveOn tended to be younger, volunteers' ages varied. For example, Rachel mentioned:

"As it turned out, a lot of the people who worked for MoveOn were very young people, and the people who I met, interestingly enough, at that very first meeting in the evening, in the summer ... . I just turned 53, there was a huge variety of people. It was all types of people, nationalities, all ages, but a surprising number were people over 40, like myself." (Rachel, personal

communication)

Another volunteer, Phil, who is in his mid-60s, expressed similar comments:

"I can tell you I'm 64 and I would say there is almost no one within 10 to 15 years of me. They're mostly 40s and 30s. They're very young ... we have a lot of people who are like me and we're upset and we want to work ... but we're not paid MoveOn people. I've been to two or three different kinds of training sessions [8] and I have not seen a single person within twenty years of me as a trainer." (Phil, personal communication).

Based on the informants' comments, most of the paid staff hired by MoveOn and volunteer organizers, who have more responsibility than regular volunteers, were in their 20s and 30s. Perhaps this is because younger people tend to have more 'disposable' time compared to most of the other generations (as mentioned by Jackie). Time certainly is an issue, as Jackie noted, their days "ranged between sixteen and eighteen hour days, seven days a week" (Jackie, personal communication). Along with time, money may be a factor. All the paid staff interviewed for this study accepted a reduction in income to work for MoveOn.

Another theme linked to more activity by the younger generation was that MoveOn had given young people a voice/place. A volunteer organizer commented:

"The things that Howard Dean was saying and the things that MoveOn was saying, both of which were very anti-Bush, very direct and gave me a sense of that finally somebody is coming out and saying what they mean." (Scott, personal communication)

Similarly, when Amy was asked why she decided to become a paid MoveOn staff member, she said, "It partly sounded exciting: a lot of young people working together, working really, really hard and to do something that we all really, really believed in." This finding complements Weber, *et al.*'s (2003) conclusion that younger adults (between 18 and 35 years old) used the Internet for political activities more than older adults based on the data from Survey2000. It is possible that, just as younger generations tend to be more familiar with new media and new technology, they may also be more familiar with Internet-driven groups, such as MoveOn.

In general, the American public seemed to pay more attention to the 2004 presidential election: Compared to the 2000 election, average voter turnout increased by four percent (up to 64 percent from 60 percent). Voter turnout for the age group between 18 and 24 increased 11 percent. For the age group between 25 and 34, voter turnout increased five percent (Lopez, *et al.*, 2005). Bennett and Xenos (2005) reported that more Web sites targeting young voters were found and that the content of these sites presented more features appealing to young generations in 2004 as compared to 2002. Perhaps members of the younger generation felt that MoveOn was a place to consolidate their power; perhaps working with MoveOn gave them a sense of community.

Sense of a community

One unexpected finding was that none of the active and passive MoveOn online members interviewed met face-to-face or communicated online with other MoveOn members, suggesting a lack of interest in meeting others. When asked whether they had met other MoveOn members, the typical response was: "I've told people about it, but I haven't contacted strangers through it. So, no, except for writing back to them [MoveOn], but I haven't contacted any members." (Lucy, personal communication) This is quite different from the activities of many Howard Dean campaign supporters who tended to gather in house parties and strengthen their ties with face-to-face communication (Shapiro, 2003). Yet, paradoxically, more than half of the MoveOn informants explicitly commented that they felt they were a part of a "community."

"I think, for me, because I live in ... a very conservative state ... I often feel like my political views are somewhat freakish ... . And sometimes I just feel as though I must be crazy, because 'am I the only person that sees this?' But MoveOn gives me a sense of community that there are other people out there, all over the place." (Wendi, personal communication)

This feeling of isolation caused by thinking that they might be deviant in their perspectives was echoed by other informants. It is not enough to explain MoveOn's success in terms of ease of participation — the organization offers a variety of activities to encourage people to be part of the community. Every single e-mail message between 1 August and 2 November 2004 asked for some kind of action. These e-mail action requests ranged from traditional political activities such as signing petitions and writing letters to newspaper editors, to non-traditional activities such as participating in a virtual yard sale [9], voting for a favorite advertisement/commercial, attending a rock concert, and hosting house parties.

Mary emphasized that MoveOn offers activities to foster a sense of a community:

"MoveOn is a grassroots organization, and to me, when you think of a bake sale, that's what you think of: that it's just community, totally non-high tech, just down to

earth ... . One of the cool things about the bake sale was that it did bring different people who may not have cooperated or been together before, so just to set up a few places and go." (Mary, personal communication)

When Mary was asked what she gained most from MoveOn, she said: "I think being informed and being part of a community, I think it's both." Upon being asked what she meant by a community, she explained:

"Knowing that even though I'm not talking to these other people I know that there is a group and I feel like I am part of that MoveOn community. Even if I'm not hosting house parties or making calls, I still am getting the information that they're getting, being given the same opportunities, and I do identify with that, kind of interesting. Even though I would say that I'm in the lower quarter, lower half, of how active I am with it, I still feel like when I do meet people and we're talking they have to know about MoveOn. It does give you already something in common." (Mary, personal communication)

Another informant acknowledged the process that MoveOn employs for creating a feeling of a community:

"They always give you feedback. They always thank you, like an immediate feedback when you send a letter. So they always send you some kind of thank you, even though it may be programmed, but it's okay. I really like the way the process works because I think that it does make a community, an electronic community with people who think alike politically, or unite politically." (Lucy, personal communication)

As Lucy commented, approximately half of the e-mail messages (34 out of 63) that MoveOn had sent three months prior to the election included appreciation for members. A typical message ends with "Thank you for all you do." (e-mail message, 17 September 2004)

MoveOn's efforts to form a community base were observed in the e-mail messages that MoveOn sent to the members. MoveOn organizers wrote messages with a sense of camaraderie. They always used "we" or "us" or "our" to make the readers feel that they were members of a community. MoveOn messages often pointed out the number of participants. For example, when they organized candlelight vigils to honor 1,000 deceased soldiers, they wrote: "we're not far short of 1,000 vigils." These types of messages reminded recipients that they were not alone but a part of a larger community. Similarly, one of the canvassing volunteers shared an example of e-mail messages that MoveOn sent:

"Everyday the top staff of MoveOn sends us an update e-mail, what they've heard from everywhere: Ohio, California, Nevada, stories about a man whose wife was sick and he had to take his kids out when he went and put them in a wagon. He just took the kids around when he did his work and they loved it, of course, because they were going all over town with him. Turned out it was a great thing because nobody was threatened by a man with two kids and a wagon." (Phil, personal communication)

The above comment indicates how MoveOn informs volunteers about other volunteers' activities. These e-mail messages reinforced a sense of a community among participants.

Even though all the informants who participated in the study were not actively meeting other members face-to-face, MoveOn did organize opportunities that encouraged members to meet other members face-to-face in events such as house parties, community gatherings, and bake sales. One informant speculated that meetings of this sort might not have connected strangers, but may have been ways to gather with friends and acquaintances.

As with active and passive online members, active offline participants also seemed to have felt a sense of community with MoveOn. The remarks below exemplify the informants' overall impressions: "I think partly what got me, and I think what got other people to go to that [initial] meeting [to solicit volunteers for the Leave No Voter Behind campaign], there was a sense of community." (Scott, personal communication) In addition, Jackie pointed out that what drove her was a sense of being a part of a national-level community. Jackie also participated in a national conference call after the election, described below:

"I remember sitting on the phone and I was crying because I was so emotionally invested in this election, and it was so inspiring, again, the sense of what being part of this national movement and this just incredible optimism that people brought to this work." (Jackie, personal communication)

Of course, she was not just feeling the optimism. She further mentioned how she was "feeling

really optimistic and feeling really overwhelmed" at the same time. Scott, a volunteer organizer, also remarked how intensely he was involved in MoveOn's activities: "I don't think I talked to my friends for three weeks. We were all in this little world."

Empowerment

One of the impacts that MoveOn had on members was the sense of empowerment gained from information access (Galusky, 2003). All but one active online member commented about how MoveOn helped them obtain politically relevant information. When asked the reason they chose to participate in MoveOn as compared to other similar organizations: "they [MoveOn] were offering me information that I wasn't getting anywhere else, that I wasn't seeing." (Naomi, personal communication) As the reporting of political news or information in the traditional mass media is manufactured (Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Webster, 2006), members appreciated the type of information that they received through MoveOn's e-mail list. The Internet provides alternative information sources unlike traditional news organizations, which tend to cover sensational (*e.g.*, violent and/or large) protests, not civil and peaceful protest events (Oliver and Maney, 2000). In a sense, MoveOn provided members with an alternative source for reception of political information.

Another member, Mary, particularly emphasized that because of the way MoveOn organized information, it took little time to sort through vast amounts of news. Carol shared similar remarks, saying that MoveOn kept her informed:

"[It would] be really hard to know that this bill's coming up for a vote and it's something we should worry about. But they just e-mail you and tell you ... . So they're just very informative and make it easy to stay informed ... especially me like after work I really don't want to get on the computer again and have to search for all these issues." (Carol, personal communication)

Other members echoed similar statements.

In addition to empowering members through providing information, MoveOn's e-mail messages to members were filled with assurances, reinforcing empowerment. For example, at the end of a message soliciting voter registration, they said: "Together, we will prevail in November. We can take back our country, if we register and vote." (e-mail message, 28 September 2004) Another example of empowering communication was a pep message that ended with: "Put your heart into this election now, and we will win." (e-mail message, 26 October 2004)

Even though their candidate was defeated, many informants who participated in the Leave No Voter Behind campaign felt a sense of pride and accomplishment. According to a paid staff member:

"We had thousands and thousands of volunteers. A lot of people were skipping dinner with their families to go out and talk to voters in their neighborhood ... . And to be working with folks who are willing to do that, who felt as strongly about something as you did, you just really felt a sense of 'we're all in it together'." (Amy, personal communication)

Rachel, a volunteer assigned to do canvassing, disclosed her sense of empowerment: "I learned a lot about myself. I went outside of my bubble, my security blanket, or whatever ... . It empowered me to feel like I could make a difference in our nation's government." A paid staff member further mentioned:

"It's just an amazing feeling and to know that in extraordinary situations you can get people to do extraordinary things, if you approach it right ... . And, also, being able to work for an organization that had so much cache in a certain community was something that I had never experienced before, being able to say "MoveOn" and having people give up money or room in their house or forty hours of their time ... . It was hell sometimes, but I had a good time. I thought it was fun to work with a lot of young people who were able to put in the hours." (Amy, personal communication)

It is certain that MoveOn members felt a sense of accomplishment by working with other members. A sense of empowerment has also been reported in the literature. According to a number of scholars, the Internet empowers people who otherwise have limited voices in other media (*e.g.*, Fuglsang, 2005; Mehra, *et al.*, 2004).

Certainly, those involved in offline activities voiced different feelings about empowerment. One of the paid MoveOn staff, Amy, explained:

"I think 'empowered' seems to really mean having some degree of decision-making power, or some degree of influence over how your work would be organized, or what the approach to your neighborhood would be, because everyone worked in really different

neighborhoods. Like what worked in parts of rural Ohio isn't going to work in downtown Philadelphia and what worked in the West isn't going to work in the East."
(Amy, personal communication)

She referred to the rigid control that the MoveOn campaign held. There was not much flexibility for an individual "community" to adopt certain strategies that would be appropriate for its specific circumstances. The campaign organizers — especially those at the top of the organizational pyramid — maintained tight control of the campaign. Consequently, in this research case, all the low-level paid staff interviewed expressed a sense of disempowerment throughout the campaign. For example:

"A lot of people had a real problem with the degree of hierarchy ... . A lot of people just felt like they were totally disempowered as an individual and that they had been hired to do a job that they felt qualified for, and they had like no say. But, realistically, the scope of the campaign kind of necessitated that kind of passed-down decision-making." (Amy, personal communication)

A part of this sense of disempowerment may have been due to the hierarchal structure that was set up to operate the campaign. MoveOn hired an organization to coordinate the hiring of staff and canvassing efforts. This organization appeared to manage the Leave No Voter Behind campaign like traditional political campaigns. Another paid staff member, reflecting back on the campaign, said:

"I feel like there was a problem with the hierarchy because I didn't feel like those of us at the bottom really understood. Changes would be made to the model all of the time ... . And I felt like I didn't have enough time to build relationships with the volunteers." (Emily, personal communication)

To MoveOn's credit, they did invite paid staff to debriefing sessions at the conclusion of the campaign. However, some informants did not feel that it was an effective way to hear feedback from the paid staff:

"I think that we were all a little disillusioned, I guess ... maybe with time they'll recognize it was an amazing place and an amazing time and an amazing opportunity to get involved in a critical election ... , but that a lot of the people that I worked with, and also sometimes myself, were really unhappy by being in that situation. No one really quit, but there was some crying and a lot of frustration just about how rigid the system was and how rigid the campaign was ... . But if one day I'm someone who's in the position to be at the top of a big campaign wheel like that, I think I would make more of a point of making sure that everyone felt empowered." (Amy, personal communication)

Welch (2003) asserts that MoveOn gave participants a sense of empowerment. This observation appears to be based on online activities of participants, but does not necessarily apply to all participants' offline activities, in particular, those of low-level paid staff. Welch's observation fits better with active and passive online members, who are more like "armchair activists." As Bennett (2003) states, the Internet does not automatically create non-hierarchical and flexible networks, but the structure of groups or organizations are reflected in the existing structure. The informants reported that low-level staff members were not involved in the decision-making processes for the campaign, which made them feel disempowered. It should not be forgotten that behind the marvelous image of a grassroots organization as an institution for empowerment, it was paid staff who supported the structure for the MoveOn campaign.

Conclusions

This study provides a different perspective from previously conducted studies regarding Internet use for political activities — it offers voices of people who participated in political activities coordinated by MoveOn. Whereas most of the studies in the past were focused at the macro-level, this study focused on the micro-level. The purpose of this study was to provide accounts from online participants as well as from volunteers and paid staff who worked for the 2004 U.S. presidential election as a part of MoveOn's Internet-based grassroots organization. The study reports the views of informants from different participation levels and identifies differences and similarities between these informants.

The predominant themes that emerged from the interviews identified reasons people participate in political activities, the development of a sense of a community among participants, and different types of empowerment through participation. The study found that

lowering costs of participation and availability of various activities encouraged online members to be more active whereas these factors did not influence offline active participants very much. While it was ironic to find that members interviewed felt part of a community without face-to-face interactions, this sense of a community helped recruit participants in offline campaigns. Finally, empowerment turned out to be a divergent issue. Online members and most volunteers expressed a sense of empowerment derived from having control over political information, participation, and political actions. At the same time, however, within the organization, MoveOn appeared to struggle with yielding control to some paid staff. There was a discrepancy between the image and the reality — MoveOn was touted as an Internet-driven organization that facilitated “the adoption of decentralized, non-hierarchical organizational forms, and make movement-entrepreneur-led activism more feasible.” (Garrett, 2006) However, their Leave No Voter Behind campaign strongly resembled traditional political campaigns.

Bimber, *et al.* (2005) conceptualized collective action with the assertion that the Internet makes boundary-crossings easier, and this does seem to explain activism that happens solely in online environments (*e.g.*, in this study, activities that were engaged in by active online members). However, this reconceptualization does not explain collective action among active offline participants, those who joined offline activities that were solicited online. In fact, the active offline participants’ behaviors bear a resemblance to traditional collective action.

One of the unique aspects of MoveOn is that the organization is continuously bridging online and offline worlds. We have not yet found a way to theorize this novel phenomenon. When conceptualizing online collective action, different levels of participation need to be taken into account. Further development of the theoretical framework is needed. There can be no question that additional research is needed in this area.

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Notes

1. Hindman, 2005, p. 121.
2. Garrett, 2006, p. 206.
3. Bimber, *et al.*, 2005, p. 377.
4. E-mail message, 6 August 2004.
5. The interview protocols included questions about reasons to participate in MoveOn, types of activities individuals engaged in, MoveOn’s e-mail list and Web site, interaction with other members, and the experiences of working for MoveOn.
6. ‘Get Out the Vote-kind of thing’ refers to MoveOn’s (and other organizations’) efforts to encourage eligible voters to vote. It is a part of the Leave No Voter Behind campaign mentioned earlier.
7. MoveOn arranged a three-day training in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for the paid staff of 500.
8. Whenever a new volunteer was hired, a senior volunteer or MoveOn staff provided a training session for them. The session covered how to talk to voters when visiting individual houses, etc.
9. MoveOn organized a virtual yard sale through eBay to raise money for the campaign.

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