

The progressive potential of online organising

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No matter where you lie on the political spectrum, it's increasingly hard to find anyone willing to suggest that UK progressives have anything other than a very difficult few years ahead of them. For those who reached political maturity around the time of Labour's 1997 victory, progressive opposition represents unknown territory and uncertainty abounds as how to make the best, and the quickest, job of it.

One source of optimism should be that we have at least two compelling international examples in recent years for how to revitalise progressive politics in places where reactionary right-wing governments had a long-standing hold over politics: the USA and Australia. Both the US Democrats and the Australian Labor Party were carried to victory in 2008 and 2007 on a tidal wave of support from progressives.

Their stories differ in many respects, but in one critical area they are the same: both campaigns attribute a substantial proportion of their success to the online presence of progressives and, in particular, to the existence of effective vehicles for organising online – including MoveOn.org in the USA (www.moveon.org) and GetUp.org in Australia (www.getup.org) – which had come into being several years prior to their election victories and both of which were able to boast membership numbers equating to roughly 1 per cent of the population by the time these parties came to power. In the US, MoveOn provided vital membership and key staff and strategic advice to underpin the development of Organising for America (www.barackobama.com), the online element of Barack Obama's campaign.

For UK progressives, a number of organisations are emerging that are moving into a comparable space. 38 Degrees (www.38degrees.org.uk) (I am Campaigns Director) was launched at the end of May 2009 and already has over 100,000 people on its email list. Avaaz (www.avaaz.org), the organisation which aims to organise globally along the same lines that MoveOn.org organises in the US, has a high UK membership which takes regular actions targeting global institutions and governments around the world.

Here, some of the lessons from their experiences will be investigated and applied to a UK context and the future potential for the emerging progressive political space will be explored. Between them, these organisations illustrate some of the most effective example of online organising and have some impressive successes behind them. They have variously fought and won battles to defend public service broadcasting, forced climate change up the agenda despite strong political opposition, and provided a constructive outlet for solidarity with international human rights struggles happening largely outside the global media spotlight – like Avaaz's continuing work on the oppressive regime in Burma.

Further good news is that this renewal seems to be most likely to happen during periods of opposition. Much is currently made of the Conservatives' relative strength online. As progressives, perhaps the most positive interpretation of this is that we have

easy access to multiple reminders of the reasons to be cautious about the Coalition government: the real Tories documenting their views in these spaces seem to hold far more reactionary views than their high-profile Westminster advocates, not least on issues of critical and urgent importance, such as climate change.

There's also a compelling progressive alternative growing daily: blogs like *Liberal Conspiracy* (www.liberalconspiracy.org), *LabourList* (www.labourlist.org) and *Left Foot Forward* (www.leftfootforward.org) offer a daily rebuttal to the idea that political blogging strength can only be found to the right of the political spectrum (not to mention an excellent riposte to those who argue that the internet is leading to the over-simplification or 'dumbing-down' of politics).

Online organising: deepening democracy

There are clearly lessons to be learnt about effective campaigning and movement-building from the successes of existing online groups.

Acting fast

First, these organisations are able to respond more speedily than organisations with larger staff (38 Degrees has only four staff; MoveOn has fewer than twenty) and more cumbersome forms of communication. This not only affects the character of campaigns (which can easily adapt to a changing situation) but also facilitates the rapid response to an emerging crisis which allows supporters to engage with the issue as it emerges in the media, rather than several days or weeks after the initial crisis has blown over.

When the super-injunction against reporting Parliament was taken out against the *Guardian*, for instance, 38 Degrees had an action to MPs live within a couple of hours. Equally, during the Copenhagen summit, Avaaz was a leading part of the international NGO effort to deliver day-to-day campaign targets that were congruent with the picture emerging from the summit itself. The day after BNP candidates were successfully elected to the European Parliament, anti-fascist activists Hope Not Hate delivered an extremely effective 'Not In My Name' photo petition which has grown their activist base to almost 150,000 (www.hopenothate.org.uk).

Bridging parties and single-issue groups

Equally, these forms of organising are able to operate in the space between single-issue groups and political parties. Political commentators have been cogitating on the shift away from political parties towards single-issue politics for many years. Whilst this binary analysis may make columnists' lives a little easier and chimes neatly with a wider perceived trend away from other unifying belief systems, such as organised religion and overarching political ideology, the truth is more complicated and creates a space into which online groups may well be uniquely well-placed to move.

Many of those defecting from mainstream political parties don't choose single-issue groups only on resigning their party membership, but have been members of other interest groups for years. Many of them will have tried to prosecute the agenda of their particular special interest through the party political machinery, but as political parties have become less and less tolerant of dissent, this has become increasingly difficult. Eventually, many of these activists choose to commit time and resources in different ways across a series of issues with which they are particularly engaged, so continuing to work across multiple

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issues but freed from the tyrannies of party structures and in-fighting. Such single-issue groups will rarely refer their members to other issues in way that political parties (and trade unions) might. Multi-issue groups like MoveOn and its sister groups offer a halfway house: offering their members the chance to engage on issues other than the one that first brought them into the organisation but without any compulsion to campaign for a position that they are not interested in, or don't support.

Accommodating people's different depths of engagement is also facilitated easily online: Barack Obama's campaign gave people multiple options for engaging with offline activity, allowing them to set the parameters of their own involvement. Their online presence was a stepping-stone to delivering one of the most impressive offline political campaigns seen for years: from voter-registration, to phone banks, to door-knocking, Obama's campaign created a tidal wave of political activism that led to victory.

Working in partnership

Another lesson from the experience of these organisations is the extent to which they have been willing to work in partnership with the existing civil society organisations amongst which they have taken their place. One reservation that almost all online campaigners hear frequently is that online actions can't take the place of offline activism: there's no online equivalent of attending a demonstration, or lobbying one's MP in person. Of course, that's entirely true, and none of the organisations in question seek to supplant it. Rather, they augment it, by offering those people without an opportunity to take part in person a plausible alternative. Not only is this a more inclusive model of campaigning – people who are less able to leave home due to ill health or low incomes are not excluded as they might once have been – it also increases the likelihood that the true scale of feeling about an issue will be reflected, rather than curtailed due to logistical constraints. Multi-issue organisations also need to access the detailed understanding of issues that emerges from specialist organisations, and in return can deliver big numbers and rapid action.

Overcoming apathy

Online-focused organisations have also made it easy for people who do not identify themselves as politically active to take part in ways which are sufficiently undemanding to overcome their initial scepticism. Online groups give people the opportunity to experiment with becoming more politically active without requiring them to immediately step into the public realm. While people may feel that 'low bar' actions, like simple e-petitions, don't offer the depth of political engagement that other forms of organisation might, there is ample evidence that they are the first step for those who are dipping their toes into activism for the first time. Power 2010's recent work to popularise issues of democratic reform for a broader audience have illustrated that offering a simpler form of support that doesn't imply a need to understand the detail of highly complex constitutional issues before getting involved can be a powerful means of bolstering people's willingness to get more deeply engaged over a period of time.

Creating a critical mass?

Equally, for those whose views are in the minority in their local area, online organising gives them an opportunity to be part of a critical mass of progressives that can achieve their political goals. For progressives living in areas dominated by people with conservative

political views, online campaigning offers the chance for a deepening political involvement that may not be available in the flesh. Rather than retreating into an increasingly apolitical mode, isolated progressives can be offered the opportunity to feel part of a movement on a regular basis, not just at rare moments when large numbers of people come together for a demonstration.

Constructive controversy?

Finally, the story of online, multi-issue groups outside the UK has been one of addressing some of the bugbears that have been divisive amongst progressives and converting them into grist to the mill of future organising.

MoveOn was partly born out of the frustration amongst Democrats during the dying days of the Clinton administration. Equally, Avaaz has converted the divisive issues of the Iraq war and the Middle East peace process into movement-builders for their global organisation. The multi-issue character of these organisations offers a unique opportunity to convert political controversy and opposition into a constructive force for mobilising against similar errors in the future.

If the left is to recover quickly from the decline of the last few years, tolerating and, at times, embracing dissent from across the progressive spectrum will be an essential part of the picture. There are too many issues urgently demanding our attention for tribal or partisan loyalties to get in the way of making change.

Retaining relevance: evolving tactics of online organising

These most recent examples, however, still focus heavily upon the capacity to deliver mass coordinated moments to exert major pressure on elected politicians. For progressives in the UK, the challenge to re-energise people is coming at a different time.

Much of the initial novelty of the internet is starting to wear off: large numbers, whilst still a compelling part of the picture of the delivery of successful campaigns, are treated with greater reserve than in the early days, when petitions with vast numbers of signatories could hold centre stage on their own merits. Equally, the ease with which people can contact their elected representatives no longer holds sway with politicians in the same way as in the first days of email. Some are convinced that MPs will simply ignore online actions: it's too easy to reflect serious public concern, some claim, and people are writing in on issues that aren't their top priority.

There is no doubt that politicians don't see online organising in the same light as letter-writing. But they would be foolish to believe the difference is so great. Online campaigning gives a clearer sense of broader levels of public concern: not the issues that will consciously drive people in the polling booth in every case, but the ones that shape the instinctive reaction they have to the questions of whether theirs is a 'good' MP. The Robin Hood Tax campaign (robinhoodtax.org.uk), while still to deliver policy change, has demonstrated to politicians throughout Westminster that huge numbers of people are willing to consider radical new approaches to taxation in pursuit of greater economic and social justice within the UK and globally.

Nor is emailing so different in many people's minds from writing a letter. Online action may mean people are in contact with MPs more often, but this is something politicians should welcome: regular communication with constituents is central to being an effective representative. The most enlightened MPs have responded to the creation of tools like

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'Write to Them' (www.writetothem.com) with offers of regular online communication with constituents and a dialogue with online groups about how best to work together to give their voters an effective response to their questions (even if those responses might not always be the ones their constituents would hope). MPs can no longer afford to be cloistered away from ordinary voters for four or five years between elections, and nor should they aspire to be.

The vulnerability of the Coalition government to backbench dissent could reawaken politicians to the significance of these sorts of tactics: large numbers of people applying pressure on particular issues are far easier to ignore during periods with a single party decisively in control. Equally, the increasing technological capacity to direct activism at constituency or even ward level will make even moderate levels of local activism much more visible and, in turn, will influence the views of the potentially large number of elected representatives in marginal seats. 38 Degrees' recent campaign with Spinwatch to highlight the professional track records of MPs involved in lobbying before becoming Prospective Parliamentary Candidates has worked at a constituency level to highlight concerns to particular individuals and urge them to commit to greater transparency in the future.

The 'digital divide' is also a frequent argument deployed against engaging with online campaigns: not everyone can do it, so no one should do it. Not only is this to misunderstand the extent to which the skills for using email have spread throughout the UK population – 38 Degrees' members include a substantial percentage of people over sixty, for example – but the alternatives proposed, such as writing a letter, are easily as demanding for anyone who lacks confidence in writing at length, for instance. In fact, as outlined above, online campaigning includes a whole raft of people on an equal basis for whom other methods of engagement can be laborious and inaccessible. The internet remains impenetrable for some people – and that is something that online campaigners should be concerned about – but it also reaches out to people for whom more traditional options aren't appealing.

It's this inclusiveness which also explains why the critics who claim that the internet is a haven for political geeks aren't taking account of the full picture. There are certainly some spaces online reserved for people who find politics endlessly fascinating and revel in engaging in the sort of hour-by-hour analysis of political events that leaves most people cold. Perhaps it's a bit of a relief to discover that those people still exist when mainstream politics has lost so many people's interest, but they are far from the dominant type amongst online activists. It's a curious fact that the criticisms about the internet 'dumbing down' politics so often sit side-by-side with criticism of these highly specialised discussions. The fact that both are made with such encouraging regularity may indicate that internet political discussions are much like those that happen offline: some will be too specialised for some, others too plain-speaking. Criticism from both sides indicates that while no one is getting it right for everyone, there's sufficient choice and diversity to meet the needs of many.

A new political culture

But to secure the best possible advantage from online activism, we not only need to stay ahead of the latest technology developments and their political applications. It's also essential that we engage with the way that online life shapes and changes our political culture more widely.

Making the news: blurred lines and new voices

First, the relationship between media producers and consumers will become much more open and the lines between the two categories far more blurred. The production and consumption of 'news' online has already shifted radically and as conventional media outlets – print journalism in particular – struggle to adapt their business model to cope with content free at the point of access, the web is filling with alternative news sources. The conventions that have shaped the relationship between the people who hold power in society and those who report on them are frequently turned on their head online: the separation of news and opinion, respect for embargos and corroboration of sources are all less sacrosanct online. Online news coverage and dissection of that coverage is now a field occupied by many people who have little or no training (on the job or otherwise). There is a mass liberalisation of the process of commentary and debate which moves it beyond the political classes that traditionally engage most in these activities. The news outlets coping best with this shift have been those willing to open their doors to contributions from their consumers.

Media outlets also seem to be demonstrating greater willingness to enter the campaigning fray, moving from charity campaigns for good causes at Christmas time to year-round efforts to convince their readers or viewers to take action on a particular issue. *The Guardian's* partnership with the 10:10 campaign (www.1010uk.org) is just one example.

Online, the relationship between reporting the news, commenting on it and trying to shape it is far less sharply defined. Campaigning organisations must be willing to become a source of news for their members, as well as their call to action. Of course, the core task of organisations remains mobilising their members, but increasingly they will become a weathervane of what their supporters 'ought' to be caring about. Embracing this new role and working closely with opinion-forming outlets online (as well as with other campaigning groups) will be an essential part of movement-building over the next ten years.

Small is beautiful: new parties taking the stage?

Other beneficiaries of the changing nature of politics may be some of the smaller parties. With continuing pressure to move towards proportional voting systems, the ship may already be coming in for parties that have previously hovered around the margins of Westminster politics. Online makes it far easier to persuade people that they are part of a relevant minority group, rather than just wasting their energies at the edges of the real debate. For progressives, that amounts to both good and bad news. So far, parties to the right – in some cases, far right – have seemed to benefit the most from this new trend, although some of the Greens' recent successes act as some counterbalance. But in some areas, votes splitting between three viable progressive options: Labour, Liberal Democrats and the Greens – could create more, rather than less space for the right.

But it won't all be bad news. First, more political parties in contention breathes life into politics at a time when many are simply growing bored of limited options. Second, disgruntled voters defecting to smaller parties represents a far smaller overall loss to political life than their complete withdrawal (the exception being when members of mainstream parties defect to racist parties on the far right). Third, whilst the internet gives people a chance to feel that they're part of a movement when that movement is still relatively small, it also gives them the tools to assess the most effective way to use their vote to bring about the government they want. Whether vote-swapping, tactically voting or simply focusing their

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campaigning energy on particular seats (including opposing the far-right in those their target constituencies), all these activities are made easier by online technology.

So while growing plausibility for smaller parties might be bad news for those used to a command and control model of organising through party political machinery, it represents good news for those who identify themselves with progressive social values far more than they associate with a single political party. For those people, voting to get the best government they can has become a great deal easier. And for those terminally turned off by big party politics, realistic alternatives to withdrawing from political activism in general will become more and more appealing.

Back to reality: putting politics back into day-to-day life?

Perhaps the most important way in which online organising offers hope to tired and frustrated progressives in the UK, however, is as much about looking back as it is forwards. Our online lives offer the possibility of a re-emergence of the convergence between our social and political identities. Internet campaigning can make a critical difference not only to the experience of the people on the receiving end of it: politicians, major corporates and, occasionally, journalists – but also to the people participating by reconnecting people's political lives with their wider social context.

During many of the most vibrant periods in the UK's political history, a consistent feature has been the extent to which people's political and personal lives have been integrated. In our recent history, the most powerful examples of mass organisation and opposition to the political status quo have emerged from communities where people's political identities were not separate from their wider life. As a miner, for instance, union involvement mapped on to the broader life of communities: your union colleagues were also your work colleagues, their children probably attended the same school as your own and if your family was religious, you quite possibly shared the same place of worship. Longer ago, battles against slavery and for universal suffrage happened in no small part due to the deployment of existing social networks, through study, faith or broader social ties, to ensure that one's political beliefs and activism were not detached from the day to day business of life: working, socialising, worshipping or educating one's children.

38 Degrees' experience already seems to illustrate that real-life relationships are central to building a vibrant political movement. Our internal data shows that most of our growth as an organisation comes simply from people pressing forward on one of our emails; we write to them, asking them to take action and, usually without being explicitly asked, they forward our emails to other people they know who they believe will share their concern about an issue.

But pressing 'Forward' is only the tip of the iceberg if we're to fully embrace the possibilities of the internet as a place for political renewal. Already, on social network sites like Facebook, Twitter and, to a lesser extent, MySpace, there's growing evidence that people's political interests are sitting comfortably alongside their social and work lives. Much is already made of the diminishing separation between work life and personal life, as people make their status updates and tweets available to people from all aspects of their personal and professional networks. Even more importantly, people are happy to 'badge' themselves as supportive of particular causes in these spaces with seemingly greater ease than offline. In the relatively historical (internet development happening as fast as it does) case of Make Poverty History, individuals carried the campaign branding on their MySpace profiles alongside messages about their social plans and their musical tastes.

Conclusion

In reality, the answer to the question of what will re-engage people in politics is a simple one: giving people the opportunity to act together to change society in a way that they believe will make it better, now and in the future. For progressives in 2010, this means organising around the core principles that unite us across our political and ideological variations, to deliver social, economic and environmental justice in the UK and globally.

Online organising opens new doors in offering excitement and a sense of immediacy about taking action, and may yet re-open the long-closed doors that made political life as much a part of everyday experience as going to work, caring for your loved ones and socialising with your friends. Online activism must take its place alongside the wider progressive movement in the UK in offering people the chance to make politics matter again.

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