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Online Political Activism: MoveOn.org

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ABSTRACT

The website MoveOn.org promotes liberal political activism by providing an online public sphere for those American citizens disenfranchised by a political system now dominated by corporate politics. MoveOn.org's growing membership, together with its early successes in online activism and fundraising demonstrate the beginnings of a movement whereby US citizens are increasingly turning to the Internet rather than to a political party to express their views. The site has empowered many US citizens by giving them a collective voice and, at the same time, has increased their participation in the political process thereby strengthening the US democratic system. However, MoveOn.org now faces the potential threat of domination by business and state groups.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is having a significant effect on the American political landscape as exemplified by the liberal political activism group, MoveOn.org. The American federal tax law labels advocacy groups such as MoveOn.org as a '527' organization (Bank 2003, p.A.3): an organization which is able to be involved in areas of the political process on the strict condition that there is no working relationship between the group and political parties or candidates (Bank 2003, p.A.3). As Peter Carbonara (2004, p.48) explains, such organizations "may raise money and use it for things like get-out-the-vote drives and to buy television time to express a political point, but not to explicitly endorse a candidate". The difference between MoveOn.org and other 527 organizations such as American Coming Together, The Media Fund, Club for Growth or Swift Boat Veterans and POWs for Truth (Cummings 2004, p.A.4) is that the MoveOn.org website, www.moveon.org is the central point for all of its operations and is the heart of its identity. In addition, the web site acts as a vehicle for MoveOn.org members to become involved in liberal political causes across the US.

Jurgen Habermas's (1979) notion of the 'public sphere' refers to an environment of public awareness that arose with the development of capitalism in Western society in the mid 17th century and in which individuals could debate various civic matters without the influence of government or business (McChesney 1997, p.10). Habermas noted, however, that from the mid 19th century, the media tended to manipulate public opinion rather than provide it with a forum. More recently, McChesney has criticised the way in which the US media is dominated by corporations. The central argument of this paper is that the MoveOn.org website functions as an online 'public sphere' for its members but that it, too, is in danger of becoming a mouthpiece for business and state interests.

MoveOn.org

In 1998, President William Clinton stood trial for impeachment by the House of Representatives, following an investigation by independent counsel Kenneth Starr (Grant 2004, p.89). Starr's investigation was at first meant to examine President Clinton's involvement in the 'Whitewater Affair'. The 'Whitewater Affair' focused on Clinton's role in a series of land deals at the time when he was Governor of Arkansas. Later, the probe was extended to include the dealings of the Clinton White House and - in a divisive move - the President's affair with a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky (Grant 2004, p.90).

In September 1998, a married couple, Joan Blades and Wes Boyd decided to develop an online petition expressing their irritation with the Clinton impeachment. The web site was called 'Censure and Move On' (Cornfield 2004, p.73). In the first week of being online, the web site recorded just over 100,000 individual endorsements of the petition. This had increased to 300,000 individuals by the 1998 midterm election. By the time of the House Impeachment vote, it had risen to 450,000 endorsements (Cornfield 2004, p.73). At this time, Blades and Boyd began to establish an e-mail database and considered broadening its involvement in political causes. For instance, the site embarked on collecting volunteers and funds from its members in order to defeat the politicians in the 2000 election who had voted for impeachment (Cornfield 2004, p.73).

In general, Blades' and Boyd's objective for the MoveOn.org group was to involve more individuals in American politics in order to propagate a more diverse range of opinions (Janofsky and Lee 2003, p.A.22) as they believed that the established American political system had failed the general public. Boyd argued that the failure was due to "The model [within the American political system, which] has led to an arms race in fund-raising and saturation of broadcast with very simplified messages and it has led to broad cynicism" (quoted in Janofsky and Lee, 2003, p.A.22). Cornfield (2004, p.73) claimed that during a 1998 Harvard University conference covering online politics, Blades expressed her ideal of "returning power to ordinary citizens, moving politics beyond confrontation, and the glories of community" via the Internet.

By 2002, Zack Exley and Eli Pariser had joined the two co-founders Blades and Boyd in operating MoveOn.org. While the directors work individually from their homes, they correspond with each other regularly through e-mail, instant messaging and conference calls (Taylor and Tumulty 2003, p.32). Zack Exley and Eli Pariser became involved with MoveOn.org through their previous work, Exley was previously known for his 2000 campaign web site, GWBush.com, which satirised the mistakes made by George W. Bush in the 2000 campaign (Jacobson 2003, pp.3197-3199). After September 11, Eli Pariser produced an online petition: 9-11peace.org that stated its opposition to President Bush's call for retribution and emphasised the need for greater diplomacy (Markels 2003, p.24). 500,000 people across the world endorsed this online petition (Taylor and Tumulty 2003, p.32) which would later unite with Blade and Boyd's web site, to form the current MoveOn.org site (Markels 2003, p.24).

In terms of organization, there are no established MoveOn.org structures within local communities or fixed leadership roles within the running of the MoveOn campaign. While this has been seen by many as a weakness of the group (Boyd 2003, p.13), Zack Exley, the MoveOn.org organizing director counters that "This kind of organizing lets you communicate with every single participant. In other organizations, you have a hierarchy with regional leaders and local leaders. With MoveOn, everyone who goes into meetings has read the same materials as the leaders have" (quoted in Jacobson 2003, pp.3197-3199).

During the period from 1998 to 2003, MoveOn.org established a member base that contained around 2.4 million individuals (Janofsky and Lee 2003, p.A.22). The central interaction between the group and its members is through general e-mails on a daily basis (Griscom 2004, pp.30-31). This focus on communicating through e-mail is vital to MoveOn.org's online success. As Larry Pupuro of Rightclick Strategies,

an Internet marketing company explained, "Unlike a lot of organizations that are trying to use the Web, they [MoveOn.org] clearly understand that it's about e-mail, not about a pretty Web site" (quoted in Jacobson 2003, pp.3197-3199). In addition, Vice-President Al Gore described the ability of MoveOn.org to use online strategies as "twenty-first-century techniques to breathe new life into our democracy" (quoted in Griscom 2004, pp.30-31).

AN ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL LEFT

The need for an online 'public sphere' results from the dominance of conservative politics within the American political system. McChesney argues that foundations and individuals with a political conservative background have invested heavily into both their own and the mainstream media since the 1970s in order to advocate the ideals of the political right. He claims that "Billionaire right-wingers establish political media primarily to propagate pro-business politics and push the range of political debate ever rightward" and that the political right in America has been the driving force behind the move to influence public or non-profit media into adapting the similar journalistic values of the commercial media (1999, pp.32-41). Furthermore, he maintains that within mainstream media, liberalism is perceived in relation to American capitalism rather than in terms of class and labour. He also contends that while American conservatives have platforms in television and radio to argue a bias against their political beliefs within mainstream media, in comparison there is little opportunity for legitimate liberal media analysis to occur (1997, pp.56-58).

MoveOn.org believes that it is representing the average American citizen by bringing liberal values back into the political process, following the Democratic party's move towards corporate politics (Janofsky and Lee 2003, p.A.22). New Mexico Governor, Bill Richardson stated that groups like MoveOn.org, "have become the replacement for the national Democratic Party" (quoted in Berlau 2004, pp.18-20). This is demonstrated by the greater size of MoveOn.org's email list (2.4 million members) compared with that of the Democratic Party (1.5 million addresses) and by the Democratic Party's subsequent attempt in 2003 to purchase the MoveOn.org's database. MoveOn.org rejected this offer on the grounds that it was a breach of members' right to confidentiality (Janofsky and Lee 2003, p.A.22).

In a political environment in which one form of political view prevails over another, the latter will find it difficult to be heard in the mainstream media. Since the conservative stance is currently the principal force within American politics, liberalism needs a new forum such as that provided by the MoveOn.org website.

MOVEON.ORG AS ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE

The MoveOn.org website functions as an online public sphere in various ways. MoveOn.org's 'meeting tool' software, which members can download off the site, gives them the power to arrange gatherings in their local communities or meetings with congressional representatives (Griscom, 2004, pp.30-31). The site also has 'Action Forums' where members are able to debate important political issues and discuss their possible solutions (Griscom 2004, pp.30-31). In addition, the website encourages members to become involved in fundraising efforts for political candidates or MoveOn.org political campaigns (Griscom 2004, pp.30-31).

MoveOn.org's online fundraising and political campaign efforts began in February 1999, when the site gathered online, \$13.4 million and 750,000 hours from volunteers towards the 2000 election campaign (Cornfield 2004, p.74). MoveOn.org made the decision that the site would use this money and volunteers' pledges to support thirty candidates in congressional races against sitting congress people who supported the Clinton impeachment (Cornfield 2004, p.74). In the thirty congressional elections, thirteen candidates unseated incumbents (Cornfield 2004, p.74). Since 2000, MoveOn.org has been involved in various political causes in America such as the issue of gun safety. After the

Colorado school shooting in 2000, the organization created the "Gun Safety First" online petition which was signed by 60,000 individuals (Cornfield 2004, p.76). The petition called on Federal Congress to "accept its proper role in regulating firearms" (quoted in Hafner 1999, p.5).

MoveOn.org also became engaged in American state politics. The group encouraged its Californian members via e-mail to protest the recall of its Democratic Governor, Gray Davis in the 2003 California recall election (Jacobson 2003, pp.3197-3199). In addition, MoveOn.org raised funds online for an advertising campaign to highlight Republican candidate for Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger's alleged mistreatment of women (Hawkes 2003, pp.42-43). It also held an online funding drive in 2003 to support the attempt of Texas state Democratic Party senators to end the Republican Party's redistribution plan by leaving the state (Taylor and Tumulty 2003, p.32). Within 48 hours, MoveOn.org had gathered one million dollars for the Texas state senators (Taylor and Tumulty 2003, p.32).

During the lead up to the Iraqi War, MoveOn.org started its campaign against military action. In the fall of 2002, the group sought to voice its opposition to the involvement of American armed forces in Iraq by combining with other activist groups in an online 'Win Without War' campaign (Cornfield 2004, p.77). By October 2002, the MoveOn.org website offered its members a sample protest letter addressed to Congress, an online form that members could circulate amongst its own e-mail list and the opportunity for members to volunteer time or donate money online to MoveOn.org (Cornfield 2004, p.77). The group carried out online fundraising from December 2002 to February 2003 for antiwar advertisements on television and in newspapers across America (Cornfield 2004, p.77-78). On the 26th of February 2003, MoveOn.org conducted the 'Virtual March on Washington' with the central aim of promoting its antiwar message to politicians and the general public (Cornfield 2004, p. 78). The organisation's goal was that for every minute of the workday of 26th February, each U.S Senator's office would hear the anti-war message (Cornfield 2004, p. 78). Members were encouraged to volunteer to phone, fax or e-mail the antiwar message (Cornfield 2004, p. 78). The march made an estimated one million contacts to Senators on the day and was featured in the mainstream media, thereby generated publicity for the organisation (Cornfield 2004, p.78). Furthermore, in 2003 MoveOn.org produced the 'Let Inspections Work' petitions that were later distributed to Senators' and House members' home offices across America by an estimated 9,000 MoveOn.org members (Hawkes 2003, pp.42-43).

However, MoveOn.org's involvement in the anti-war movement did not end when the war started. When no 'weapons of mass destruction' were found in Iraq, it began a censure campaign in February 2004 (Abraham 2004, p. A13). MoveOn.org members were encouraged to send an online message to their congressional representatives, suggesting that President George W Bush should be censured by Congress for the deception of the American public in regard to the supposed existence of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (Abraham 2004, p. A13). The site allowed its members to insert their details and a personalised message in the online form, which was then instantly sent to the appropriate representative (Abraham 2004, p. A13).

Finally, the MoveOn.org website functions as an online 'public sphere' because members are involved in the overall decision making process of the group. Decisions regarding the political issues MoveOn.org is to be involved in are strictly made by its members (Jacobson 2003, pp.3197-3199). For example, between 2001 to 2002, the group prioritised the issues of campaign finance reform and environmental protection based on their members' online responses (Cornfield 2004, p.76). In general, MoveOn.org's decision making process is based on gathering information from their members through random polls and their online site responses to issues (Boyd 2003, p.13). Once a particular political issue has been decided upon, MoveOn.org sends an e-mail urging its members to act - for example, by telephoning their local congress person in order to protest the FFC rule (Gilgoff 2003, p.27).

It is the MoveOn.org member base, rather than any outside business or government representatives, which forms the central power base in the

group's decision making process. Jacobson (2003, pp.3197-3199) claims that MoveOn.org's success is based on its capacity to represent and organize the political beliefs of its member base on the Internet without the need for a revolutionary hi-tech web site. Furthermore, he argues that the core of MoveOn.org's success has been its capacity to constantly readjust to whatever current political issue is a concern to its members. In his words, "MoveOn is able to 'move on' whenever the political landscape changes" (Jacobson 2003, pp.3197-3199).

POTENTIAL THREATS TO MOVEON.ORG AS A PUBLIC SPHERE

There have been two examples in MoveOn.org's recent history that highlight the potential threat posed by business or government influence to the organisation's function as a public sphere. The first example is that of the involvement of two billionaires, George Soros and Peter Lewis with MoveOn.org in 2003, when the MoveOn.org group created the 'MoveOn.org Voter Fund', a fundraising drive for its up-coming political campaigns (Bank 2003, p.A.3). The aim of the MoveOn.org voter fund was to raise ten million American dollars. George Soros and Peter Lewis agreed to contribute 50 American cents to every dollar given to it (Bank 2003, p.A.3). Peter Lewis, the Progressive Corp. chairman, stated that "the MoveOn Voter Fund is an effective way to inform public opinion and bring new people into the game"(quoted in Bank 2003, p.A.3). Meanwhile, George Soros's spokesman claimed that members of MoveOn.org had "shown their willingness to put their money where their mouths are, and George is supporting them" (quoted in Bank 2003, p.A.3). By November 2003, the MoveOn.org voter fund received 3.65 million American dollars from its members (Bank 2003, p.A.3). Although the Wes Boyd MoveOn.org co-founder argued that the purpose of this agreement was "to pull out the hundreds of thousands or millions of people we need to be participating in the system" (quoted in Bank 2003, p.A.3), this type of financial agreement has the potential to damage the image of MoveOn.org as one that is solely based on its members' values and to compromise the political ideals of an activist group.

The second example centres on MoveOn.org's influential role within the Democratic Party itself when it held an online presidential primary amongst the Democratic candidates in 2003 - prior to the actual Democratic presidential race - which took place in Iowa the following year (Nichols 2003, p.8). The only condition of the MoveOn.org online primary was that the candidate who received more than 50 % of the vote would win the MoveOn.org endorsement (Nichols 2003, p.8). In the end, former Vermont Governor Howard Dean won the online primary with 44 % of the vote, which generated attention towards his presidential campaign (Nichols 2003, p.8). Specifically, the Dean campaign gained volunteers, financial guarantees from individuals and additional e-mail addresses (Cornfield 2004, p.xiv). Such associations put at risk MoveOn.org's identity as an independent political group, instead giving rise to the suspicion that it operates primarily for the benefit of the Democratic Party. This could both alienate prospective MoveOn.org members and reduce the fundraising ability of the group.

CONCLUSION

The dominance of conservative politics within the American political landscape and the mainstream media has left liberalism struggling to find a voice. As a result, a large number of citizens have turned to political groups such as MoveOn.org who give disenfranchised citizens the opportunity to become involved in current political issues within the American system. The MoveOn.org website is the centre of the group's political operations and offers members the chance to actively participate in the organisation's political campaigns or Internet fundraising. There are various reasons why the MoveOn.org web site should be considered an online public sphere. First, its members have the power to direct their financial or volunteer support to the political causes of their choice. Second, the members can interact within an online environment where there are no pressures from state or business interests. Finally, its members are given the power to voice their opinions in regard to the direction of the group. As a result, MoveOn.org reflects its members' grass root values rather than any pre-defined political philosophy.

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