

Can Internet technology still revolutionize activism?

by Robert Lebowitz, Digital Freedom Network

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(May 15, 2003) One of the biggest promises of the Internet was the transformation of political activism. No longer would change come about solely through the actions of large organizations, claimed the Web's early enthusiasts. Now, they claimed, individuals could rouse the concern of their fellow citizens for a particular cause through Web sites, e-mail, and online petitions. Those who normally shunned demonstrations and limited their participation in the public sphere could be contacted personally in their e-mail box, and all that would be necessary for them to do to show their support would be to click a button or fill in a field. Soon, pundits predicted, there would be a revolution in grassroots participation in the political process.



Now, several years after these enthusiastic pronouncements, there has been a reconsideration of the effectiveness of online activism. Although the World Wide Web is still in its infancy, sufficient time has passed for those involved in electronic activism to reflect upon the basic questions underlying their work: Has the Internet really increased participation in the political process? Have mass e-mailings really had a significant impact on decision-makers? Will the Internet decrease the importance of affiliation with parties and organizations and increase the impact of the individual?

E-mail petitions

E-mail petitions have been repeatedly skewered for their impracticality. Superficially, they seem to be an improvement on traditional petitions that are taken from door to door or signed in a public square, since they can reach exponentially more people with much less effort.

However, many have pointed out that the e-mail petition is flawed by its very design. Each person who signs the petition will be adding his or her name to a list of names that will then be presumably forwarded to several friends or acquaintances. Each of those recipients will then add their names to the list and mail them out to others. The result will be that, in fact, the original e-mail petition will actually be split into several lists, which will then split into even more lists. Were the originator of the petition then to try to count the number of people who signed the original list, he or she would have to sift through potentially thousands of duplicate signatures.

E-mail petitions inherently carry other problems that jeopardize their value. The opportunity for forgery looms large; it is very easy to cut and paste names from whitepages.com into an e-mail petition. Additionally, affixing one's name to an e-mail petition requires much less effort and allows for much more anonymity than signing a real petition. For these reasons, politicians are inclined to treat the dedication and commitment—as well as the very existence—of the signers as dubious.

A recent example of the fallibility of e-mail petitions is that of a recent electronic campaign to save [Amina Lawal](#), a Nigerian woman condemned to death by stoning for the crime of having a child out of wedlock. An e-mail petition falsely bearing the logo of Amnesty International was disseminated to protest the execution of Lawal, erroneously claiming that it was to occur on June 3. The well-intentioned wave of e-mail responses—which ranged from Nottingham, England, to Beirut, Lebanon, to Washington D.C.—alarmed the Nigerian-based women rights groups most directly involved with the aspects of Lawal's case. Their concern was that these petitions would hasten Lawal's execution, as those subscribing to the implementation of Sharia law in this matter would fear that foreign, non-Muslim supporters of Lawal were about to intervene and thus take pre-emptive action.

A number of scholars of electronic activism, such as author Howard Rheingold, who discusses how communication and computing technologies amplify human talents for cooperation in his recent book *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, are duly skeptical of such e-mail petitions.

"[They are] either urban legends or ineffectual," said Rheingold in an e-mail interview with the Digital Freedom Network.

"Does anybody who actually works with human rights issues believe that an [e-mail petition](#) would have changed the Taliban's treatment of women? They can be effective only if they include the real names and addresses of the petitioners and are delivered by an effective lobbying organization. Even more effective are electronic calls to action that enable people to call or write their Congressional representatives about specific legislation."

A [study](#) by OMB Watch, a nonprofit group focusing on activities at the US Office of Management and Budget (OMB), concurs with Rheingold's observation. "Most [US] Congressional offices give the most weight to personal letters, followed by [in descending order of priority] personal visits, telephone calls, faxes, personal e-mails, paper petitions, form letters, postcards and form e-mail."

Web-based petitions

Web-based petitions have received a somewhat more favorable evaluation. Petitions posted on a Web site allow the reader more time to absorb the information and issues. There is also more initiative involved, since the signer actively logs onto the site rather than passively receiving an e-mail in his inbox. As a result, Web-based petitions are utilized more in the activist world.

Web sites like [e.thePeople](#), [ThePetitionSite](#), and [PetitionOnline](#) offer the ability for activists to post a petition and then have others come to the site to sign it. According to the "Five Myths of Online Activism" [report](#) on the e.thePeople Web site, a poll of petition-writers revealed that 24 percent of petitions received some sort of response. "While most letter- and petition-writers report no tangible results," the report

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states, "to say that they are never successful is an overstatement."

In a similar vein, US Senator Dianne Feinstein's communications director said in a recent [article](#) that any online petition sent to Senator Feinstein "does get addressed," while admitting that a personal letter is "more meaningful."

The Internet as a tool for mobilization

If online and e-mail petitions boast only a modest success rate, it appears that their great contribution to electronic activism is their capacity for mobilization. Numerous examples abound of the Internet's surprising ability to "get the word out" of dates and times of organized protests, demonstrations, and coordinated activities.

Groups like [Stand for Children](#) rely upon the Internet to organize protests and demonstrations of solidarity. Stand for Children organized a variety of diverse activities to draw attention to a dearth of proper health insurance for children in the United States. These activities included planting flowers in Boise, Idaho, singing songs on the steps of the Arkansas State Capitol, and ringing church bells at a designated time throughout Grass Valley, California.

As these activities were spread out over the entire country, it was imperative to find a way of unifying and coordinating them so as to broadcast a central message. For this purpose, the Internet was used as a tool to give those involved in each event a sense of being part of the larger whole.

"The Internet is the glue that [held] these local events together," said Jonah Edelman, executive director of Stand for Children, in an [article](#) discussing the mass demonstration.

And yet, for all such examples of successful use of the Internet for mobilization, there are others who still believe in an even more ambitious role for the Internet in political activism.

Virtual sit-ins

In recent years, activists have emulated the protests of the 1960s by participating in "virtual sit-ins." Here, people are notified via e-mail to boycott a particular Web site or, more frequently, to disable it by flooding it with e-mail messages.

The [Electronic Disturbance Theater](#) (EDT) is a New York-based group whose virtual sit-ins have been effective, as well as controversial, tools of electronic protest. EDT—which describes itself as "working at the intersections of radical politics, recombinant and performance art, and computer software design"—makes available to the public FloodNet, software used to flood and block an opponent's Web site. FloodNet operates by sending an automatic reload request every few seconds to the targeted Web site. With thousands of such requests, that Web site is overloaded for the day and access to it is blocked.

EDT has used FloodNet in various campaigns, including a 1998 virtual sit-in in support of the Mexican Zapatista rebels at the Web sites of the Pentagon, the Federal Communications Commission, the Frankfurt Stock Exchange, Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo,

and the School of the Americas. More recently, EDT [organized a protest](#) against the World Economic Forum (WEF) in January, 2002. One hundred and sixty thousand people downloaded FloodNet from the EDT Web site and then went online to deluge the WEF Web site with hits. After only a few hours, the site collapsed and remained down for the rest of the week.

Roberto Dominguez, co-founder of EDT, [has maintained](#) that the goal of his organization is not to shut down a Web site—which can be construed as hacking and therefore punishable by law—but rather "to disturb."

EDT's actions have drawn criticism, however, even from those in the activist and hacker communities. Some have blasted EDT's radical methods as stifling free speech, while others have questioned what message disabling a site sends to a public that would have no idea why a particular site was disabled.

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Part One of this article was written using sources from the [New York Times](#), [Salon](#), [USA Today](#), [Wired](#), and [AlterNet](#)