

Can Internet technology still revolutionize activism?

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A case study in e-activism: Woomera2002

However, the right combination of innovative Internet technology and careful on-line and off-line coordination can make a powerful statement and effect great change.

One noted example is Woomera2002.

On March 28, 2002, over 1,000 activists converged on a wind-swept patch of the Australian desert outside the Woomera Refugee Camp. They had come from throughout Australia as well as Japan and England to protest the government's harsh confinement of asylum seekers who had arrived on Australia's shores without proper documentation. In previous months, the conditions for those incarcerated at Woomera—many of them of Afghani descent fleeing the chaos of their homeland—had become markedly worse: prisoners had sewn their lips together in hunger strikes and had thrown themselves in desperation upon razor wire-topped fences.

Activists encamped in the Outback for days, drawing media attention as they engaged in loud demonstrations and tore down fences of the detention center, helping several dozen refugees escape. While escapees were recaptured, the world's attention upon Australia's treatment of refugees remained steady in the months following Woomera2002. In April, the Woomera Detention Centre was permanently closed, even though Australian Minister of Immigration Paul Ruddock [claimed](#) that his decision to close the facility was of a purely managerial nature, made possible by lower numbers of detainees.

What was unique about Woomera2002 was not that its goal of stopping the abuse at the Woomera Detention Center was achieved, but rather that its coordinators made particularly effective use of Internet technology to arrange the event and to publicize it.

Various groups had electronically networked with each other prior to the event to arrange to meet in the desert near the detention center. As the event got underway, computers were rigged up in a truck at the protest camp and an [Independent Media Centre](#), which acted as a clearinghouse of articles, photos, and opinions, was quickly constructed. First hand accounts, links to mainstream news, transcripts of audio links and analysis were posted unaltered by editors or spin-doctors.

"You didn't have to wait for the seven o'clock news and wait for it to go through all the corporate filters," [recalled](#) one participant.

Coordinators also employed innovative Internet technology to increase world attention on the event. The [Phone Indymedia Patch System](#) (PIMP) allowed people to use a telephone to leave voice messages in the form of an MP3 file on the Indymedia site. Activists in Woomera2002 along with prisoners from behind the detention

center's walls and escapees left messages using PIMP on the indymedia site. Additionally, the online [Virtual People Smuggler](#) (VPS) allowed supporters who were unable to attend Woomera2002 to send messages of solidarity to the protestors. Throughout Woomera2002, the Indymedia site allowed those logging in to get an immediate glimpse of what was transpiring "on the ground," which was glaringly different from the sensationalized mainstream news reports of the event.

Woomera2002 was an example of a successful online campaign. It used innovative Internet technology to greatly amplify the effects of the protest and involve people internationally. Its broadcasting was fast and fluid, favoring large quantities of uncensored information produced by a large group of people rather than carefully constructed news feeds written by a select few. And, perhaps most importantly, all the online activity was simultaneously mirrored by real-world, grassroots protests with concrete results.

Real world first, then virtual

Hillary Naylor is unequivocal that this last point is the key to successful Internet activism. As Education Program Manager at [CompuMentor](#), an organization that advises NGOs on how to effectively use technology, as well as online volunteer network coordinator at Amnesty International, Naylor has been involved with a number of Internet-based activist campaigns. From her experience, Naylor [writes](#) that "online advocacy (e-mails, petitions, etc.) can only be an adjunct to the off-line strategies (letter writing, visits, town halls, newspaper editorials, etc.)."

"The personal effect will always be the strongest."

—Hillary Naylor

In an interview with the Digital Freedom Network, Naylor stressed the necessity of personal contact. She pointed out that for a while now, politicians have been unresponsive to e-mails that come en masse with the same subject heading. "It is important that people personalize the subject heading of their e-mail," Naylor said. "[But] if you ask people to send e-mail, you should also arrange for them to visit the congressperson's office."

In the same vein, Naylor rejects the idea that e-mail campaigns will become more powerful as more business is done electronically.

"The personal effect will always be the strongest," she noted.

Kevin Reid echoes Naylor's viewpoint. As online organizer for Amnesty International, Reid has overseen many of Amnesty's online campaigns. Recent successes include Amnesty's "Clean Diamond" campaign, where concerned individuals were asked to forward an animated [Flash cartoon](#) that depicted the path of a diamond from the time it is mined by abused and exploited workers in Sierra Leone to the time it reaches the ring finger of an American bride-to-be. The cartoon ends with a message urging the viewer to write his or her member of Congress to support legislation that bans the sale of diamonds that were mined under such brutal conditions and which produce revenue for armies to purchase weapons to wage war against civilians and commit egregious human rights abuses, including rape, amputation and the use of

child soldiers.

The cartoon passed through thousands of e-mail boxes, resulting in e-mails, letters, and calls. In April, the Clean Diamond Trade Act passed through both the Senate and the House of Representatives, ensuring that diamonds entering America come from legal sources.

Yet for all such examples of Amnesty's successful use of the Internet in their campaigns, Reid also maintains that "e-mails are only a first step."

"We want people to move beyond that," he told DFN. "We want people to get out and join real groups where they live and join with others who are also interested in campaigning for the cause in which they are interested. We don't want armchair activists."

Sociologists have pointed out that only very rarely can individuals be mobilized through "moral shock," an effect aimed for by action alerts, electronic petitions, and virtual sit-ins. Rather, successful activist campaign which employ Internet technology build upon pre-existing networks which were first built from face-to-face interactions. To reach a high degree of success, today's political activism must artfully blend Internet technology with the spark of engagement produced by a human encounter.