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ABSTRACT

E-advocacy systems can provide powerful political tools for societies adapting to advances in information communication technologies. These tools aim to accomplish this end in various ways: by increasing the speed at which groups can mobilize, by allowing citizens to bridge traditional political affiliations and better engage in event-based campaigns, and by lowering the technical and monetary threshold by which citizens are able to communicate with decision-makers and with each other. At the same time, we see that leaps in technological capability bring with it lots of psychological and sociological baggage: “cheap-talk” effects, inequality of access to information communication technologies, and questions of organizational credibility and issue transience. In working to embrace Marres’ Deweyian vision that “issues spark a public into being,” we need to determine how to best meld technology and sociology. Bimber suggests we use e-advocacy for initial mobilization, but then implement traditional communication technologies to work to influence decision-makers. This interpretation may not go far enough in exploiting the potential of state-of-the-art communication technologies, but smartly suggests that we continue to utilize meaningful, personalized communication with political representatives.

OVERVIEW

CitizenSpeak is an e-advocacy tool created in 2002. CitizenSpeak aims to provide grassroots organizations and local activists with easy-to-use, powerful e-advocacy tools.¹

CitizenSpeak uses the open source Drupal content management system, and runs on the CivicSpace module. CivicSpace provides a simple, web-based solution for issue organizers to communicate with supporters via a website and e-newsletters. CivicSpace also allows organizers to measure and manage supporters through a centralized database.²

Parties interesting in using the CitizenSpeak are required to fill out an online registration form that asks for contact information, name of organization, website, etc. Organizers are then able to create specific campaigns and enter email addresses of persons that might be interested in their specific organization or issue. In addition to providing a supporter email interface, CitizenSpeak creates a unique webpage for the campaign. The website is hosted on

¹ <http://www.CitizenSpeak.org>

² <http://www.civicspacelabs.org/>

CitizenSpeak's server, so organizers do not need to search for separate hosting services. Invited users are then directed to the website, where they can view the issue information and send messages directly to decision-makers. Finally, CitizenSpeak allows organizers to download tailored campaign reports for analysis and further supporter recruitment.

CitizenSpeak provides streamlined tools that make it easy for supporters to contact decision-makers. CitizenSpeak also tries to address the problem of mass emails by allowing users to send political representatives personalized messages. Issue organizers may suggest topic ideas and communication strategies to supporters, but individuals are able to transmit messages that best encapsulate how the particular issue in question has affected them. The tool also allows organizers to learn about supporters by downloading reports that display contact information and personal statements. CitizenSpeak permits direct fundraising by including an optional PayPal "donate" buttons on the organization's site.³

George Hotelling built the CivicSpace/CitizenSpeak open source module, and spoke to our Community Information Corps seminar in October 2006 about some of the technical advances and setbacks he encountered in development and implementation of the tool. CitizenSpeak provides multi-lingual interfaces—supporting Spanish as well as English. CitizenSpeak has serviced organizations from all across the country, including formal organizations with long-term goals, as well as individuals using CitizenSpeak for one-time issue-oriented actions.⁴

CitizenSpeak can provide a powerful community and political advocacy tool. We'll examine how CitizenSpeak can be portrayed as an instructive case study of Dewey's "creation of a public." We'll also analyze CitizenSpeak in relation to Bimber's 4th information revolution,

³ <http://CitizenSpeak.org/node/16>

⁴ <http://CitizenSpeak.org/node/63>

and discuss the positive and negative implications of this type of information communication technology. Throughout, we must remain aware that technologies are not created and used within a social and historical vacuum. Dewey writes, “knowledge is a function of association and communication; it depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned.”⁵ We need to keep looking back to history, to traditional political organization structure, and to the social forces that impact a community’s use of information communication technologies. With this in mind, we’ll be better able to critique a new incarnation of born-digital organizations and event-based groups.

ANALYSIS

Dewey and Lippman write about how, at the time of their writing, society had become so extraordinarily complex and complicated that the public was stuck in a state of confusion. They posited that the primary difficulty facing society was one of “discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests.”⁶ In a sense, this is exactly where CitizenSpeak can play a role in binding together a fragmented society. We see this in the shift from issue-based politics to event-based politics in the e-advocacy setting. Marres writes about how Dewey and Lippman suggest that democratic politics is called for exactly when there is not a group established to tackle the issue of the times. She writes, “those who are jointly implicated in the issue must organize a community.”⁷ Those who are affected by the issues must form a community, even if short lived. This is what CitizenSpeak aims to do in providing a platform for event-based e-advocacy. As societies increase in complexity, e-advocacy tools that support event-based initiatives will remain important, at least in providing initial issue identification about time-sensitive concerns. Whether

⁵ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 158.

⁶ Dewey, at 146.

⁷ Marres, *Making Thing Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, 214.

these event-based tools can garner enough mobilization necessary to affect change on a strict deadline is another question. Testimony on the CitizenSpeak website begins to demonstrate how e-advocacy tools can be utilized to increase the ease of communication with decision-makers. Whether the consequences of this ease produce outputs that politicians pay attention to will be examined later on.

CitizenSpeak's e-advocacy tools show promise in many ways. First, the entry-cost is very low. Bimber writes, "in all the past information revolutions, we see the similar characteristics were high cost and asymmetric distribution that resulted from resource requirement and scarcity."⁸ CitizenSpeak's services are free, but users need to be connected to the Internet. Second, CitizenSpeak requires little prior knowledge and experience with content management systems. CitizenSpeak is designed for ease-of-use for novices, and all the activities accomplished through CitizenSpeak are done through its own web interface.

While there is still inequality in access to the Internet, we observe that the fourth information revolution has, in non-trivial ways, reduced the barriers for collective engagement. For example, we see that CitizenSpeak can aid in directing supporters where to even begin. One initiative that aimed to address proposed public transit service cuts in the Chicago Rogers Park Community provides a good example. One organizer claimed that CitizenSpeak can be an initial instructional tool for communities "where there's little experience with political mobilizing and campaigning."⁹ Motivated organizers can help supporters develop message ideas and identify local officials friendly to their cause.

Second, we see that CitizenSpeak allows organizers to motivate supporters around topics very quickly. Recently, a School district in Rhode Island announced that they would decide

⁸ Bimber, *Information and American Democracy*, 96.

⁹ <http://CitizenSpeak.org/node/89>

whether to close a local middle school. The vote measure was announced on a Friday, and the board would vote the following Monday. CitizenSpeak provided a platform to get the word out fast. An organizer said, “once we agreed on the text for the letter, I was able to launch a campaign in 30 minutes.”¹⁰ This particular CitizenSpeak initiative gathered 65 participants from the community and forced the school district to reconsider the proposal. Normally what would have presented a logistical nightmare in trying to mobilize a traditional campaign proved extremely fast and efficient in the digital realm.

Third, CitizenSpeak helps spread the word about issues to potential advocates through the use of the “tell-a-friend” feature. After signing up for a particular issue initiative, users can click a button in order to send an email that summarizes that initiative to a friend. This is not only useful to target friends and like-minded individuals, but has been used to alert local government representatives of various concerns of their constituents. Users work to build layers of mobilization through this informational tool.

Finally, we see that CitizenSpeak allows supporters the opportunity to provide personalized messages to decision-makers. One major criticism of mass mobilization tools like CitizenSpeak is that it produces floods of generic, faceless emails that mean little to political representatives. Some of these attention effects are due to the long-entrenched hierarchy of political communication. At our CIC seminar, a Washtenaw County representative admitted he remained skeptical of tools like CitizenSpeak explicitly because of these cheap-talk effects. He claimed that the communication hierarchy exists, even on the local level—he’ll put more attention and effort into listening to constituents who come to meet with him in his office. Next, he values phone calls or personalized postal mail. Emails and other canned or prepared text messages carry the least amount of weight. The attention decision-makers give to political

¹⁰ <http://CitizenSpeak.org/node/882>

communication mirrors the time and effort (or assumed time and effort) it takes for the constituent to create the message. This phenomenon reinforces Bimber's theory that "information abundance [leads to] reasonable calculation by political actors that a message sent cheaply means less than one sent expensively."¹¹

In some ways though, we see that carefully directed e-advocacy tools are beginning to make an impression on lawmakers. In Rhode Island, local legislators were shocked to see the number of CitizenSpeak responses from a group supporting a bill working to curb domestic violence—"at the local level, legislators simply aren't used to hearing from such large numbers of constituents."¹² While these new technologies are opening doors for novel modes of communicating with decision-makers, we also see that they reinforce the work of the organization itself. One of the Rhode Island citizens who was a part of the successful campaign to pass the domestic violence bill said, "it reminded us of why we work as hard as we do."¹³ The personal statements not only put faces on constituents, they build capital and community within the organization itself.

We've already discussed one possible critique of CitizenSpeak. Within the context of our study of digital democracy, we can identify several issues that may dampen the effectiveness of current e-advocacy tools.

While we have developed the tools to increase speed and event-based democratic participation, Bimber questions whether this technology helps or hurts the democratic process. He writes, "as the marginal cost of information and communication tends toward zero, political associations can form and disband at will."¹⁴ This transience may harm the democratic process

¹¹ Bimber, at 107.

¹² <http://CitizenSpeak.org/node/19>

¹³ <http://CitizenSpeak.org/node/19>

¹⁴ Bimber, at 104.

by introducing perceptions that short-lived associations lack credibility or a well-stated identity. Marres (interpreting Lippman) writes, “if it cannot be assumed that those involved in the debate have a good grasp of the objects of debate, then it cannot be expected that the opinions and preferences that they form about these affairs are pertinent.”¹⁵ Historically, democratic politics and the “public” that Dewey references arose out of a dire need for mobilization to address social and political ills.

Some e-advocacy supporters do not feel there are problems related to organizational credibility: “[The tool] expands participation by giving people a way to do something [who] might not come to a meeting but will click on a link,” says one CitizenSpeak user. “And they send a powerful message to representatives that there’s an organized constituency out there that means business.”¹⁶ I would argue this type of superficial political commitment is not very useful and sometimes even counterproductive—it seems epitomize the cheap talk effects and may prompt decision-makers to discredit organizations that once held sway with them.

We also see that groups representing economically diverse communities wonder whether there is enough Internet access to make online-advocacy worthwhile. If there is not enough penetration of the Internet, what good will e-tools be to allow disadvantaged groups the chance to make their voice heard? On the other end of the access spectrum, we see that there may be activist fatigue with those that are well connected to technology. If users are flooded with constant emails for political action, they might begin to ignore or filter messages, even if they are coming from an organization they support.

We’ve come to see the advantages and disadvantages posed by the increasing use of e-advocacy tools. In moving forward, we must try to map out a way to combine the distinct

¹⁵ Marres, at 210.

¹⁶ <http://CitizenSpeak.org/node/89>

advantages in mobilization speed, cost and issue granularity while decreasing cheap-talk effects and solving challenges to credibility and identity.

We can provide recommendations for further development of e-advocacy tools in order to make communication more meaningful to decision-makers. First, we need to empower supporters to create personalized messages that properly encapsulates an issue and is drawn up in a thoughtful way. We also need to craft messages that cut straight to the point and can immediately highlight the importance of the issue. One lawmaker in Chicago responded to a personalized message sent to him concerning the public transit cuts; “there’s nothing like getting a personal statement from someone who says that service cuts will leave them without a way to visit and bring food to a homebound mom.”¹⁷ This type of message depicts the humanness (and if applicable, immediate gravity) that decision-makers seem to prefer in their communication with constituents.

Second, we must resist the temptation of thinking that technology alone will solve our problems of political communication, even while the pervasiveness of such technologies skyrockets and the cost plummets. Instead, we need to urge the use of technologies in careful and calculated ways. We should call for knowledgeable organizational leaders to help craft messages and target the best delivery practices for their supporters. We need proper issue framing and informed language.

We’ve talked about how information is cheap, but credibility is expensive—we this in mind, we should not overvalue tools like CitizenSpeak. Instead, we need to use these innovative e-advocacy tools wisely and strategically in order to best serve the public interest. We must also push for increased access to Internet technologies in areas lagging in connectivity. We need to

¹⁷ <http://CitizenSpeak.org/node/89>

work to break the cycle that reflects the information rich getting richer while the information poor staying the same.

The key to e-advocacy may occur where new information communication technologies intersect with traditional rapport-building tools. Bimber writes, “perhaps the single most powerful strategy is the use of low-cost internet-based techniques to identify and organize citizens, followed by more costly efforts by mobilized citizens to communicate with public officials by phone, postal mail, fax, or in person.”¹⁸ This technique provides an interesting interpretation of CitizenSpeak as an effective vehicle for issue identification and initial mobilization, but seems to sell the technology short. Realizing CitizenSpeak’s full potential may require a more fundamental reassessment of how we (and decision-makers) think about the rapid explosion and advancements made in information communication technologies. As we become more technologically savvy and as fast Internet becomes ubiquitous, we need to be able to offer ideas that do not simply reinforce the status quo of current communication venues. Dewey states, “our modern state-unity is due to the consequences of technology employed...so as to generate constant and intricate interaction far beyond the limits of face-to-face communities.”¹⁹ We need to demand that lawmakers recognize these new venues and force them to explore novel communication techniques in a changing information environment.

¹⁸ Bimber, at 194.

¹⁹ Dewey, at 114.

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