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Going online for social change: techniques, barriers and possibilities for community groups

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Going online for social change: techniques, barriers and possibilities for community groups

Abstract

Going online can significantly assist a community group to meet its aims. Many open source technologies are designed to embody decentralised and collaborative authorship, facilitating a group's ability to share its message with a much broader audience - and on its terms. By reflecting on the techniques adopted by the Sandon Point Community Picket in going online, and how the approach mirrored their grassroots campaign, we can explore the how alongside the why of working for social change. Challenges faced, their implications, and what we can learn from them can also be considered.

Keywords

community, groups, possibilities, barriers, change, techniques, social, going, online

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Going online can significantly assist a community group to meet its aims. Many open source technologies are designed to embody decentralised and collaborative authorship, facilitating a group's ability to share its message with a much broader audience - and on its terms. By reflecting on the techniques adopted by the Sandon Point Community Picket in going online, and how the approach mirrored their grassroots campaign, we can explore the how alongside the why of working for social change. Challenges faced, their implications, and what we can learn from them can also be considered.

It is now possible for almost anyone with internet access and a home PC to publish content online. A website can be a very effective campaign tool: a means for promoting, and realising, change. Damian Trewhella and Melissa H. Conley Tyler have observed that 'there have been many constructive, innovative and successful uses of ICTs [information and communication technologies] in the [Australian] peace movement' (2007, 3). Peter Van Aeist and Stefaan Walgrave similarly note that 'the Internet brings new opportunities for everyone, but at the moment international activists are benefiting relatively more than their opponents' (2002, 47). How can we realise these opportunities while fostering an inclusive and grassroots approach?

The development of new media technologies has provided the means for websites to be created with minimal technical aptitude and little or no financial outlay. Services such as Buzzr, Drupal Gardens and Wordpress enable the creation of websites with the click of a mouse button. Having a website is widely seen as a necessity for effective and broad dissemination of an organisation's message to like-minded groups, members of the local community and beyond. It is a key technique in fostering and facilitating social change. Having a page on the social networking site Facebook and an account with the microblogging service Twitter are also becoming increasingly common for campaigns. These and

other social media services can be simply and directly integrated with an organisation's website. Using such services can be seen as an extra burden on organisations, with increasing technical aptitude being required. Considered alongside the apparent ease in creating a website, this (apparent) burden arguably provides the potential for a variation and expansion of the social relations of the public sphere and increased campaign effectiveness (see Habermas 1989).

Social media can provide a direct means of sharing information, aims and intent, with this information remaining visible long after it was first produced. Both the potential for the spread of information - across a community, even across the world - as well as the ability for many others to become involved in a cause or issue can be facilitated through an online presence. This affords some opportunities to counter disparity between a small group of concerned citizens and governments or large corporations with a wealth of financial resources and personnel (Howard 2010; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2002).

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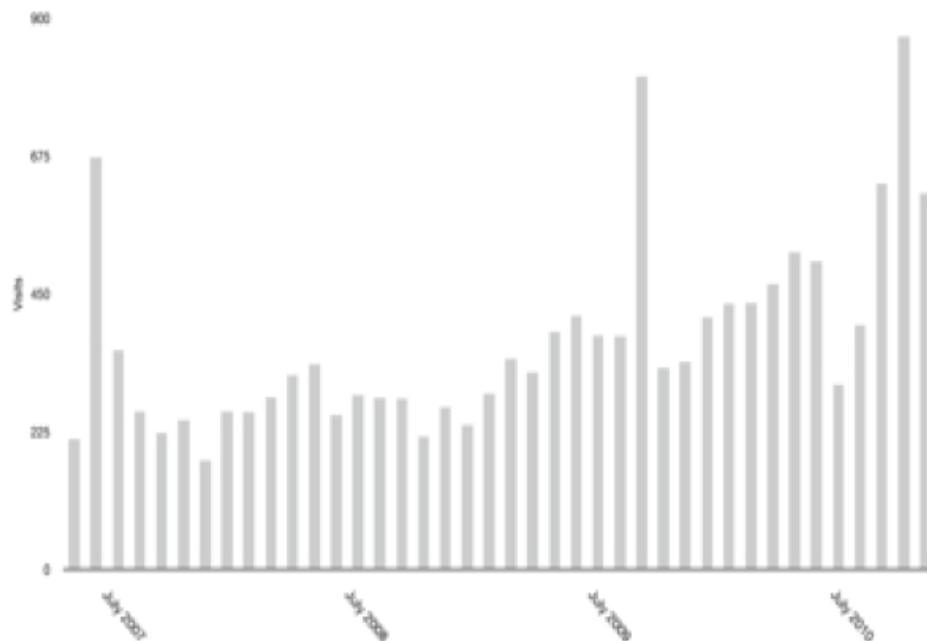
In considering the efficacy and appropriateness of an organisational website, issues surrounding access and equity need to be considered. Viewing a website requires access to a computer and an internet connection. There are some 9.6 million Australian internet subscribers, where a subscriber can be a household, out of a population of approximately 22.5 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). This indicates that a significant number of Australians are not internet users. Paralleling other indicators of structural disadvantage, the divide between those with and without access is widest between remote Aboriginal communities and other Australians (McCallum and Papandrea 2009).

We can look at specific examples to learn how websites and social media platforms can be used to promote social change. The aim of this paper is to provide some practical guidance on specific criteria for choosing a service and introduce some of the potential challenges. In exploring how existing services have been used strategically, we can develop a greater understanding and awareness of what approaches, strategies and tactics can be most effective.

The website of the local community at Sandon Point (<http://www.sandon-point.org.au>), in Wollongong, Australia, is considered here to reflect on the techniques adopted and their overall effectiveness. This website has enabled wide access to information about the area and community concerns over its future. By existing alongside a spirited and committed community campaign, the website has facilitated much greater awareness and increased the potential for broader participation.

Increasing awareness of the Sandon Point campaign is apparent in the record of site access shown in Figure 1, indicating an overall increase in visitors over time. Spikes in visitor numbers represent key strategic actions and resulting media coverage.

Figure 1: Visitors to the Sandon Point website, July 2007 - August 2010



The Sandon Point website uses the freely available and open source Drupal Content Management System (CMS), upon which the Buzzr and Drupal Gardens services are built. Built into the very structure of this CMS are key features congruent with grassroots social change, and to a broader extent some of the utopian ideals many see in the internet: open access to information and decentralised non-hierarchical approaches to democracy, social justice and change. By reflecting on the creation and evolution of the Sandon Point website, we can consider which techniques were most effective as well as approaches that have not fostered information sharing and participation as much as hoped or intended. In this regard, we can reflect on whether the website facilitated an increased social space for engagement, fostering a networking of this alternative public sphere (see Benkler 2006, Chapter 7; Howard 2010).

Making the choice to go online

When making the decision to go online, there are several key issues to consider. For community groups, cost can be a key limiting factor. Technological factors can dictate whether a web presence will or will not be an effective tool. For example, issues of equity and access can determine who an organisation's message can reach. Similarly, technological skills can determine who the message can reach, and the ability to publish and promote this message. The structure of the technology itself can shape and limit both interaction and participation - sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. In

much the same way that stairs enable and limit access to certain areas, the design of a website - the technology upon which it is built - can both foster and limit participation and interaction.

Whereas financial matters, technological factors and the intersection between the social and the technological can be considered constraints, some of these can be addressed with only a little effort. Services such as Buzzr and Drupal Gardens do not require a direct financial outlay. They are also designed to allow people with minimal technological aptitude to create a web presence. These services provide the initial steps on the path to a potentially very effective web presence.

Beyond the financial and technological, there are other questions. Why would members of the wider community want to learn about the issues? Why should they? How can they become aware? The latter can be considered a causality dilemma, a circular cause and consequence question. For example, will a web presence provide the means for a broader audience to become aware, or are local actions required to build a base awareness from which a web presence can extend this? It can be both.

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The local and the networked

The effectiveness of a website cannot be separated from actions taken in the local community and on the ground. This holds true for other forms of community engagement. In many ways, an active and engaging grassroots campaign fosters the necessary attention and awareness that creates interest in seeking further information - from which those with access can seek out relevant websites. As simple as this sounds, it makes it possible for people to gather information, to learn about an issue or campaign, in the comfort of their own home (or work environment) with very little effort on their part. What is also made possible is for those with little or no awareness of an issue to access information - information that details a community group's aims and intent *in its own words*.

The potential availability of information online contrasts with more traditional forms of community organising: only those who happen to walk past (even stumble upon) a campaign stall, public meeting or event are exposed to an issue or able to gain further insight. Beyond that, word of mouth is a key method of sharing information.

SPATE and the community picket

In December 2000, members of the local Aboriginal Community established the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy (SPATE), providing a direct and symbolic statement of a desire to protect culture, environment and heritage. The

immediate context was a controversial large-scale housing proposal earmarked for the Sandon Point area.

In March 2001, members of the broader local community received permission from SPATE to establish their own permanent presence. The Sandon Point Community Picket provided another very visible statement of community opposition to the proposed housing estate - and promotion of an alternate vision. The Community Picket became a centralised information hub for passers-by. It was also a place for members of the local community and passers-by to gather, to share experiences and to discuss the most effective means of achieving their goals: to save and protect the Sandon Point area. In effect, we can describe the social space, the discursive arena, that the Community Picket enabled as typical of a Habermasian public sphere.

The establishment of the Sandon Point website in February 2002 extended the presence of the Community Picket beyond the local, with the website seen as an add-on to the campaign. Information about the contentious proposal - and community-building alternatives - became much more widely available. The website made it possible to reach a broader (even global) audience, to make otherwise obscure details public and circumvent traditional top-down means of information dissemination. It also made it much easier for interested people to directly contact those involved in the struggle. In effect, means to counter the power imbalance between state and corporate interests on the one hand, and a small collective of local residents on the other, were further set in motion (see Trehwella and Conley Tyler 2007).

Rather quickly, the limitations and possibilities of the initial website became clear. Set up as a static website - what is increasingly referred to as web 1.0 or the pre-participatory era - the posting of content mirrored the traditional gatekeeper model of journalism. The final say over what was published was in the hands of those who had technical ability, and were in the circle of those with access to edit the respective computer files. Whether intentionally or not, content was tightly controlled. The first Sandon Point website was effectively a one-to-many form of communication.

A key feature of the first iteration of the Sandon Point website was that the technology upon which it was built, the structure of the technology, did not reflect an open and inclusive process. The technology, in essence, restricted and dictated the approach: what could be done and how. Interaction and participation were significantly restricted.

The potential for change emerged in 2006. The Sandon Point website shifted from being a one-to-many to being designed as a many-to-many form of communication. Based on the advice of international visitors involved in Indymedia and other citizen journalism projects, the possibilities of open publishing were embraced. The Sandon Point website was re-created as a means to both transcend the existing technological-structural limitations imposed on it, and to foster a more participatory, open and decentralised approach to information publication and sharing. The latter more directly reflected the idealised

aims and intent of the local community in seeking to save and protect the Sandon Point area.

Open source initiatives

The Drupal CMS, adopted as the framework for building the new Sandon Point website, is described as 'more than software - it is a project and a community' (various 2010). Development is driven and facilitated by a knowledge community that continues to grow.

Drupal is based on the open source philosophy of collaborative free software development and is licensed under the GPL. Drupal is itself open source and builds on and supports other open source projects (various 2009).

GPL is shorthand for the GNU General Public License. It is a 'free, copyleft license for software and other kinds of works' (various 2007). The license allows for anyone to download, reuse, modify, and distribute any files (i.e. computer code) that form part of the Drupal software for free. What this means is that, like other open source software, Drupal is available at no cost. The source code is freely available for anyone to modify, improve and share. The code base is actively maintained by a large community of web developers and designers. Working together, they have created a knowledge community, a collective intelligence, improving the code on which the software is built and sharing this with the world (see Flew 2008).

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The choice to use Drupal over other freely available open source CMSs (Wordpress, for example) was based on input from the extensive community of web developers, designers, and community activists involved. Another influence was the example of other groups using Drupal, including Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch, Make Poverty History and Oxfam.

Built into the technology, the code of the Drupal CMS, were key features that mirrored the aims and approaches adopted and espoused by many decentralised networks and community groups. At the core of the CMS were interactive elements designed to facilitate and foster community building via decentralised access and control. Significant aspects of the gatekeeper limitations present in the previous website were removed. Features and elements of the new website include decentralised control, many-to-many publishing, interactivity, participation, anytime conversation, open access and transparency.

The use of the Drupal CMS enabled control of the Sandon Point website to be decentralised. Contrasting with the previous reliance on those with technical skills to publish content, adding information to the website became as simple

as typing an email. In essence, anyone involved in the community campaign could become a citizen journalist, and could contribute their knowledge in an open and transparent way. The possibility of collaboration became a central feature: it became easy.

The ability to collaborate in real-time, with information instantly published to a potentially global audience, made possible many-to-many means of reporting and information sharing. The knowledge community developed in and around the Community Picket as an information and meeting hub - and the local community more broadly - could be built on and shared. The re-developed Sandon Point website was designed to take full advantage of the world wide web as both an interactive and participatory communication tool (see Spurgeon 2008, 7; Jenkins 2008).

Challenges: the skill question

The Sandon Point website was built on Drupal before services like Buzzr and Drupal Gardens existed, and hence required technological aptitude and skills beyond those held by many activists and community groups. With the advent of these services, these barriers have been largely removed. Anyone having a level of comfort using a modern computer can create a website within minutes; it is like filling in an online form. The necessary code is generated in the background. What is displayed is a clear and user-friendly graphical user interface.

Buzzr and Drupal Gardens also embody principles upon which Drupal is based. In contrast to proprietary systems that offer similar services, there is no lock-in or expensive conversion costs. A website created with Buzzr or Drupal Gardens can be saved (exported) for use outside the respective services. When something more is needed than the service provides, those with sufficient skills can customise the Drupal framework. In this way, we can consider such services as a stepping stone, providing ease in creating websites, for those without technological aptitude, that embody the ends as means.

The skill question aside, merely creating the means for participation does not ensure the hoped-for participation. For example, with the adoption of web 2.0 technologies, the number of people who contributed to the Sandon Point website increased but was still limited. As a task, contributing to the website was left to, or assumed to be the responsibility of, some people only. There is a clear delineation between those more familiar and comfortable with computers and new media technologies, and others in the local community.

One highly knowledgeable member of the community uses email prolifically and has the ability to repeatedly unsettle regulatory authorities (see *Walker v Minister for Planning* [2007] NSWLEC 741). Using email as the main avenue for communication implies a level of comfort with computers. However, this person asks others to post relevant materials to the Sandon Point website, often the very people involved in the creation of the initial website, because they are seen to have the aptitude, and because the management and updating

of the website are seen as their role. The vision of a broadly participative tool, an extension of the grassroots campaign, is still far from being achieved. The technological barriers, or perceptions of them at the least, are still present.

Reflections, possibilities

The rise in new media technologies includes the promise of an ability for citizens to create their own, alternative, public spheres, to share information on their own terms (see Howard 2010, 100-107). The services provided by Buzzr, Drupal Gardens and Wordpress allow for the creation of a website by those without technological aptitude. They provide a means to go online in a manner commensurate with an ideal of participatory inclusiveness - to build on existing social relations and structures. Open source technologies have the potential to enable non-hierarchical community building.

Fostering a transparent and participatory culture, the creation of a knowledge community, are key features of the technology behind, and the approach to, the Sandon Point website. The website has significantly increased awareness of the dispute over the future of the area, proving to be a thorn in the side of the state government, regulatory authorities and the corporation involved. The as-yet unfulfilled potential for increased involvement that the website provides is an issue for technologically minded activists, community groups and social theorists to grapple with. As the campaign struggles on, so do attempts to increase participation and effectiveness. As the years continue to pass, with active opposition to the proposed housing estate at Sandon Point continuing as further land is being cleared, the website is increasingly becoming a form of documentation: it is coming to be seen as a community history project. Is this a metaphorical graveyard, the endpoint, for campaign and other social media websites?

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