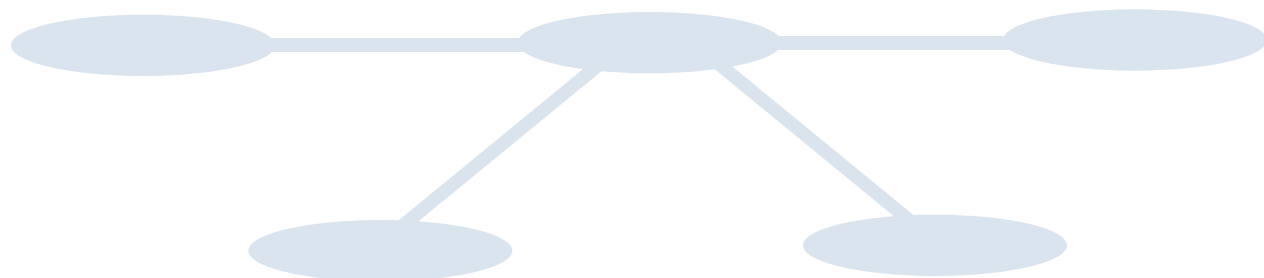




PROGRESSIVE TECHNOLOGY PROJECT

Social Movements 2.0 by **Brendan Smith**

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On September 27, 2007, the world experienced its first virtual strike. In response to a wage dispute, IBM workers in Italy organized a picket outside their company's "corporate campus" based in the 3-D virtual world of Second Life. According to a report in the Guardian, workers "marched and waved banners, gate-crashed a [virtual] staff meeting and forced the company to close its [virtual] business center to visitors.... The protest, by more than 9,000 workers and 1,850 supporting 'avatars' from thirty countries," included a rowdy collection of pink triangles, "sentient" bananas and other bizarre avatars.

While the strike was playful, it was also buttressed by careful planning and organization. Workers set up a strike task force, developed educational materials in three languages and held more than twenty worker strategy meetings. The hard work paid off. According to Christine Revkin of the UNI Global Union, which was involved in the strike, the online protest led to new negotiations and a better deal for the workers. Twenty days after the initial protest the Italian CEO of IBM, Andrea Pontremoli, resigned. (Here's a video from the strike.)

Stories like this offer a glimpse into the powerful potential of the emerging Web 2.0 world, a place where workers and others use social networking tools to quickly reach across national and workplace borders, outflank bosses and politicians and wield collective power. But right now, the type of virtual solidarity seen in the IBM strike remains more promise than reality. People are willing to sign petitions, donate money, trade information and join in political discussions online, but translating these activities into solidarity built on trust and a willingness to take economic or physical risk on another's behalf is exceedingly rare.

As a result, political action online has been largely relegated to electoral politics and tepid humanitarianism: it's been great for raising money for tsunami relief and mobilizing voters, but pretty flaccid when it comes to wielding social movement power. (One exception is organizing around highly repressive regimes, where workers, students and others have successfully used mobile phones, Twitter, etc. to organize escalating protests and to free jailed activists.)

This tension around the pros and cons of online organizing has spurred a healthy debate in the social movement community. Earlier this year Eric Lee, the godfather of the online global labor movement, posted "How the Internet Makes Union Organizing Harder," an article that drew a flurry of responses. More recently community organizers in the United States have been debating on DailyKos the merits of an article that appeared in the Christian Science Monitor, entitled "Real Change Happens Off-line," written by Sally Kohn, senior campaign strategist at the Center for Community Change.

As labor activists we have been experimenting with online strategies for more than a decade, spurred by our work in the 1990s building a large but informal network of contingent workers, and now running Global Labor Strategies (GLS), a resource center for the global labor movement. We come to the problem as longtime chroniclers of social movements interested in the underlying forces at work online, how these forces can help



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or hinder social movement building, and how they challenge existing union and social movement structures.

What's New and What's Not

Social networking is not new and not about technology. It's not about MySpace, Facebook or YouTube; instead it's about what all of us do every day: kindle and expand networks of friends, family, co-workers, etc. In the political context it's about finding and building communities of interest, linking common struggles and acting collectively. Facebook and other online social networking tools are just a new way for people engage in this age-old activity.

But at the same time, the online universe is not simply another place for people to congregate, circulate a petition, debate politics or mail out a newsletter. Nor is it simply a new technology like cable television--merely bringing more channels into the home. Instead, the web is increasingly looking like the invention of the printing press, which radically changed the lives of even those who could not read, by spurring the Protestant reformation and scientific revolution.

During the past several years, the Internet has evolved from its first generation as a static information portal (e.g. websites) to what is now referred to as Web 2.0, marked by the explosion of user-generated and interactive content. According to Clay Shirky, author of *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* and one of the best chroniclers of the social implications of Web 2.0, this communications revolution promises to be the "largest increase in human expressive capability in history." There are five reasons why this revolutionary electronic space is especially relevant to the future of the global social movements:

1. **Group Formation:** New social networking tools, ranging from Facebook and Twitter to e-mail and listservs, make forming groups--and hopefully social movements--much easier. Every time organizers knock on doors, hold a community meeting or organize a protest the primary goal is to entice individuals into group activity; they hope to transform isolated actors with little social power into a powerful collective force for social change. The problem is that group formation has always been very hard to do.

What is new about tools like Facebook is that they make more varieties of group formation possible. Now, totally on their own, millions of people are finding others who care about the same things they do, whether it be around oyster farming, workplace complaints or radical politics. What the web has revealed is that there were thousands of these latent groups that for hundreds of years were never able to form, because it was too difficult for people to identify others with similar interests and too difficult for them to efficiently communicate when they did. So now even the most transient and marginalized sectors in society can potentially form support and sharing networks. Thousands from the homeless community, for example, have gathered online to share their stories and swap survival strategies, often posting from public libraries.



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At their core, social movements are about group formation, and suddenly the tools exist to make it much easier to bring people together. In practice, we might begin by helping ordinary people access and learn how to use these tools and enable them to uncover their own latent groups--groups that may well not fit neatly into narrow organizational agendas. Social movement activists might also spend more time trafficking where people are already gathering online, such as within the Obama social networks, and practice getting in the middle conversations and shifting debates.

2. **Scale and amplification:** With a single keystroke, social movements can now push information out to millions of people and lift up marginalized voices into national, and even global, spheres. But scale increasingly does not just mean trying to reach the whole world, especially as it has become increasingly difficult to break through the online noise. Scale is also about surgically communicating with discrete sets of readers. At GLS, for example, rather than targeting the global labor movement writ large, we have tried to target the narrow subset of the global labor movement that is grappling with long-term, strategic questions of worker and class representation in the global economy. Two decades ago we could never have precisely and cheaply carved out this audience.
3. **Interactivity:** The web is not a one-way transmission belt like television; it's more akin to the telephone, allowing conversation, intimacy and debate by tapping into the fundamental human desire for self-expression and shared communication. Much of the strength of social movement organizations lies in their ability to empower those shut out of elite political activity to participate. With the Internet encouraging this participatory tendency, social movements need to approach their technology platforms as more than just a new way to send out fliers and opinion pieces or run petition drives. They need to build freewheeling electronic spaces where people can share, debate and collaborate.
4. **Destruction of hierarchies:** Elites have long dominated the broadcast and distribution networks, making them the primary gatekeepers of information flow, allowing them to frame and dominate political discourse, and decide what is and what is not news. But new broadcast tools increasingly allow ordinary people to publish and distribute their own news and begin redirecting information flows. The elites are terrified of this "mass amateurism" of broadcasting. The mass layoffs of journalists and the frantic fears of politicians who never know when a swarm of people might go on the attack are two recent examples of this erosion of the power of the "professional classes."
5. **Cheapness and ease of tools:** Social movement organizations have been perennially under-resourced, and with the current financial crisis and global recession the situation will surely worsen. But with the advent of web-enabled mobile phones and \$300 computers, cutting-edge communication tools are becoming cheaper and more powerful, and as a result, are quickly leveling the technological playing field. In South Africa, for example, even though Internet penetration



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remains at around 10 percent, mobile phone penetration sits at 98.5 percent.

Social networking tools are also becoming easier to use. Just in the past two years, people with little technical ability are now able to create websites, Facebook pages, YouTube videos, etc. We're drawing closer to the point where the majority of online tools are so simple that technical experts are beginning to fade into the background. The web is no longer the exclusive dominion of the young and highly educated, and as this trend continues it will allow social movements to cheaply and easily reach out to increasingly diverse constituencies.

These rapid changes raise more questions than they answer. Here are eight that we've been grappling with:

1. **What does it mean when individuals begin organizing outside and without the help of traditional organizations?** We do not know the ramifications for unions, for example, if truckers increasingly come together online to organize protests over gas prices--as they did in April 2007--without ever attending a Teamster meeting or receiving a house call from an organizer. Traditional worker organizations have already been outflanked by the global economy; now they face the challenge of workers and their allies acting collectively outside of trade union structures. This type of online self-organization might offer fertile ground for social movement organizations, or it might mean traditional "brick and mortar" institutions need to rethink how they are structured and how to position themselves in a Web 2.0 world. Some organizations might reinvent themselves as network hubs that work to frame and synthesize issues for diverse and fragmented constituencies; others might begin to transform into bridging organizations that help transfer online organizing into offline political power.
2. **It's easy and cheap for organizations to bring people together into a swarm or smart mob, but what do you do with them then?** Groups like MoveOn have perfected how to share information, raise money and sign petitions. But outside the electoral arena, few have been successful in converting group interest into escalating political activity. Because of this, people are joining and then quickly dropping out of social networks. Labor and social movement organizations need to keep experimenting with how to keep workers engaged and encourage online activity, from information sharing and debate to initiating collaboration, innovation and collective action.
3. **Will offline social movement organizations be willing to cede control as ordinary people increasingly leverage social networking tools to channel their own activities?** The destruction of hierarchies online means that top-down organizations will face increasing pressure from members to permit more rank-and-file debate and input. This is a healthy process and a long time in coming. If traditional organizations are to embrace the dynamism of the social networking sphere and move beyond simply posting op-eds on Huffington Post written by union presidents or NGO executive directors, they will have to cede significant control. Organizations that resist this trend will become increasingly irrelevant online and offline.



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4. **How do labor and social movement organizations address the dangers associated with online action?** The majority of online tools and spaces are commercial ventures, and the transparent nature of the web means that elites and bosses are always watching. Several Egyptian bloggers were jailed last year after participating in calls for a general strike. Facebook recently closed the account of an SEIU affiliate who was trying to organize casino workers in Nova Scotia, Canada. As Eric Lee told the Guardian, "Social networks in principle are excellent but something such as Facebook, for example, can close down anything it wants. So I think unions need to have their own tools, websites and mail lists." At the same time, there are legitimate concerns about the spread of online anonymous slander and racism, "mobbing" of innocent victims (e.g. "swiftboating"), false rumors or misinformation without ways to rebut. Social movements need to anticipate and respond quickly to racist, nationalist and other destructive forces converging online.
5. **How do we track the demographics of who's online and who's not and what tools they are using?** Some of the numbers on web usage are surprising. It's known, for example, that Latinos in the United States are offline in huge numbers but their cellphone use is skyrocketing just as mobile phones are increasingly web-enabled. It's also known that poor and working-class folks in the United States are often trapped offline, but those that are online appear to be more interactive and engaged than other segments of the population. According to the Pew Research Center, households making less than \$50,000 a year are more likely to post content (pictures, music, comments in chatrooms, etc.) online than higher-income households. The demographics are changing fast; social movements need to be constantly reassessing assumptions about their target audience.
6. **How do we present complex ideas online?** We know that people take in information in myriad ways and weigh it differently depending on medium. On the web it is been difficult to figure out how to present complex ideas and synthesize large swaths of information--blog posts and YouTube talking points work; long issue reports and white papers do not.
7. **How does offline and online social movement building fit together?** We know it is essential, but where and when to rely on face-to-face contact during an online campaign and vice versa is still unknown. When, for example, do we call a virtual versus a nonvirtual protest; when is physical contact required to build lasting and deep solidarity versus cheap and fast Facebook or Twitter campaigns? The Obama campaign broke new ground by fully integrating its online and offline activities. Each time a supporter interacted with the campaign, data specialists created new layers for targeting that person by region, engagement and volunteer preferences. Then organizers used many tools--text messages, phone calls, house visits, etc.--to figure out how and where to plug supporters into the campaign structure. Social movement organizations need to experiment with these techniques but anticipate that online organizing will continue to be littered with failed experiments.



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8. **How can social movements wield real power online?** Corporate and political elites have yet to figure out how to transfer their existing power structures into the virtual world. This 2.0 governance crisis is good news for social movements since it opens up a space for us to build alternatives to the current system. But it also means that essential social movement tactics we have used in the past to resist and interrupt power structures--such as strikes and civil disobedience--are at the moment less effective online. We need to keep exploring what if any are the means by which organized groups of people can exercise power online or parlay their online organization into power offline.

None of these questions will be answered overnight, but it is in our interest to engage this new terrain and figure out how to use these swirling forces to our advantage.

So where to we go from here? Last spring, encouraged by the success of their virtual IBM strike, labor organizers launched "Union Island" on Second Life, a space built to help the labor movement leverage social networking tools, including how to create avatars and build more dynamic websites, as well as swap tricks of the trade over a "beer" at the virtual bar.

Maybe we can all start by heading over to the bar for a virtual beer.