Politics on the Net: A Three-Way Digital Divide

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BY CHRISTINA KOUKKOS

We're really proud to present this issue by Christina Koukkos, managing editor of Release 1.0. *She first joined us at EDventure in 1994, working as my executive assistant for a bit over a year. She was way overqualified, and eventually left us in order to get a PhD in "The History of Human Consciousness." However, she got sidetracked in Budapest. In early 1996 she joined Uproar.com, a Budapest-based online game show and entertainment website eventually acquired by Vivendi. She worked her way up through a variety of "real jobs" managing product development, design and other functions over four years, helped launch Uproar Europe, and then moved to New York in 2000.*

In 2001 she re-joined EDventure part-time and came back full-time as associate editor of Release 1.0 *in June 2002. With nothing to hold her back, she became managing editor four months later, and has been held captive here ever since.*

In addition to her experience inside a software start-up, she also brings political experience to this issue of Release 1.0. *She studied political science at Lehigh University, specializing in political philosophy and history. During the election period of 1992, she studied US politics at American University in Washington, DC, and interned at Liz Robbins Associates, a lobbying firm. "That experience, by the way, convinced me to stay the hell out of Washington," she notes now.*

In fact, she says, "I started research on this issue thinking that the technologists working on political software were utopians without a clue about the real world of politics. But I discovered that some of them do know the realities, and those are the ones that are successful." As for

herself, she'd love a way to participate from outside Washington, which is what this issue is about.

- Esther Dyson

It's a presidential election year in the US, and the hot topic at dinner tables, on the front pages of newspapers and on television and weblogs is politics. Among the technology set, however, the hot topic is not only politics; it's how to use the efficiencies, communication capabilities and distributed power of software and the Net to implement and ultimately affect the political process in a useful way.

"Useful" is the important – and tricky – part.

Thanks to blogging software and a variety of Web-based tools that support online and offline meetings and political activity, individual participation in politics has become easier than in the past. In addition, the decentralized strategy of Howard Dean's presidential campaign, the adoption of Meetup by political activists and the emergence of activist organizations such as MoveOn have galvanized a growing number of voters. Add to all that a politically polarized population and an upcoming presidential election that is expected to be as close as the year-2000 edition. . .and a flurry of IT business and political activity results.

One major catalyst for the kinds of activity taking place is the 2002 McCain-Feingold campaign-finance reform legislation (SEE PAGE 6), which severely limits the fundraising and spending capability of formal political institutions such as the Republican and Democratic National Committees (RNC and DNC, respectively). The legislation created a power vacuum that has been filled by smaller, more loosely affiliated interest organizations ranging from Planned Parenthood to nonprofit, so-called 527 organizations (named after the section in the tax code that authorizes them; see page 6).

Generally lacking IT departments or technology expertise, these and other organizations are turning to a variety of easy-to-use, low- or no-installation-required Web-based software tools and services to organize themselves and their members more effectively.

Another catalyst is the advent of blogs with a political bent, such as InstaPundit, Buzzmachine, DailyKos and countless others. Their authors now have the tools to inform and influence the opinions of their readers and of the traditional press in a forum not (yet!) manipulated by communications directors, political consultants and PR specialists. Supporters of blogs and other forms of decentralized media made possible by the Net have declared the beginning of the end of what Jock Gill, a former aide in the Clinton White House, terms "advertising carpet-bombing campaigns" that he claims turn off voters.

But in the end, the mission that underlies most official politics is not to generate activity or conversations, but to garner the most money and thereby (says conventional wisdom) the most *votes*. Getting people to interact with each other, as Howard Dean and his supporters discovered, doesn't translate directly into votes or changes in policy. Reaching a few influentials is one thing; moving large numbers of voters to action is another.

But politics involves more than *electoral* politics. In theory, at least, it includes some sort of ongoing interaction between the population being governed and the individuals elected or appointed to represent their interests. Of course, many people are quick to point out that the US is a *representative* democracy, not a direct democracy, so continuous interaction is not that important. In fact, it can be counterproductive: Trying to practice direct democracy in the US is akin to micro-managing someone you hired to a leadership position. Leaders are elected to *lead*, not to follow the direction of those loudest in making their wishes known.

Regardless, elected officials listen mainly to the ideas and opinions of two kinds of entities: those with the most money (to donate to the next election campaign!), and those that represent the most votes (to win the next election!). Technology won't change that. . .or will it?

Digital divisions

Critics of Web-driven political participation point out that it results in a kind of tyranny of the minority: the digital divide, diffused into politics. According to a year-2000 US Commerce Department study, 86 percent of households earning $75,000 or more per year had Internet access, compared to 13 percent of households earning less than $15,000 per year. The study also found that around 50 percent of white and Asian-American households have Internet access – more than double the rate for black and Hispanic households. Further, a 2003 study by The Pew Research

Center for the People & the Press shows that most interaction with government online is by relatively well-educated, well-off, white *men*.

In the US, a number of civic organizations and schools are working to bridge the digital divide. But in the context of US politics online, we see a another three-way digital divide: elected officials and their advisors, who don't understand or trust technology tools; technologists who often misunderstand the motivations of politicians and the vast, complex mechanisms of governance; and the general population, which barely understands – or cares about – how to use *existing* civic mechanisms.

So far, the goals and tactics of the pioneers in political software range from supporting or seeking to influence existing political processes, to reformist or revolutionary activism – envisioning a *different* system and building tools to facilitate that change.

Campaign-in-a-box vendors have one simple goal in mind: to help candidates win elections. Their target customers are political consultants and campaign-management specialists, who design campaign strategies and choose the technology to implement them: Centralized or decentralized? If decentralized, *how* decentralized?

Nonprofit-in-a-box vendors and projects help formal membership organizations, interest/issue groups and other nonprofits better manage their fundraising and outreach activities.

Finally, activism-in-a-box vendors and projects give individuals tools to exercise their political power as a group or around a particular issue, whether it's ongoing (such as the Fight Big Media monthly Meetup; see page 22) or temporary (such as the one-time "Listening to the City" meeting organized by America*Speaks*; see page 30).

Interestingly, each sector can be represented by at least one for-profit and one non-profit venture: I Stand For, Orchid for Change, AdvoKit and CivicSpaceLabs (among many others) for campaigns; GetActive and Groundspring.org for nonprofits; and Meetup (which had its tool appropriated by political activists. . .much to the company's delight), MoveOn and Web Lab for activists and other political participants.

The Way Things Are

The first step in bridging the political digital divide is for the IT industry to educate itself about the political process and about the expectations, habits and biases of its potential customers.

Selling to notoriously technology-phobic, cost-conscious campaign organizations is tough at best. Dan Robsinson, CTO of AdvoKit (SEE PAGE 10), quotes John Hlinko from the Clark campaign: "Trying to convince these guys to invest in technology is like trying to convince them to buy shovels next to a mountain of gold."

"Technology is sometimes considered a necessary evil," explains Sanford Dickert, former CTO of the Kerry for President Campaign and current director of Rawlings Atlantic, a management consulting firm. "Political campaigns are not impressed with technologically-advanced solutions. Their goal is simply, 'Does a technology bring in money or votes?' If that goal is not met, it doesn't matter."

But the risk aversion of campaign managers – especially when it comes to IT, the effect of which is still unknown and therefore dangerous – may work in favor of the vendor or type of technology that breaks through first. If something works, that campaign manager will use it for candidates she serves in the future...and all her competitors will copy it. Win once, and you are almost guaranteed more business...and as in a gerrymandered congressional district, knocking off the incumbent is not easy.

In the end, building a political candidacy, nonprofit or activist operation is not much different from building a business. First, a small group of dedicated individuals have an idea and build a prototype. If the prototype holds together, they look for funding to expand their operations on the basis of promised success. Once they have enough funding, they refine the product, hire sales and marketing staff, and hope enough people buy their product to see the valuation and market share shoot through the roof. Finally, they seek to solidify their place (and fight off competitors) by maintaining efficient operations and responding to market conditions.

Translated into political parlance, the three major markets/functions needed by all three sectors – campaigns, nonprofits or activists – are: to raise funds, to garner support/get out the vote and to govern/run operations.

A fourth area involves the active participation of the rest of the population – those who are governed.

Most of the flurry of software-development activity in the last 18 months has addressed fundraising, garnering support and encouraging participation; those are the three functions we focus on as we cover our three sectors below. (Another popular topic has been the use of voting machines/online voting; we will not cover that area in this issue.) Politics has discovered the power of the Net to reach individual donors and voters – just as manufacturers discovered its power to reach individual consumers, sometimes bypassing and sometimes working hand in hand with retailers.

Fundraising

Most funding for political campaigns – which for a presidential campaign can run $150 million or more – traditionally came in the form of big checks from a few wealthy individuals or organizations. Since 1974, the Federal Election Campaign Act has limited the "hard money" an individual or organization could contribute to a particular campaign or campaign committee (now $2,000). The big money came in the form of unregulated "soft money" donations, which had no such limits, to the RNC, DNC and other political groups; they could spend an unlimited amount on get-out-the-vote initiatives, voter education, party-building activities, state and local elections, and "issue" advertisements that do not expressly endorse a candidate. The Act also created the Federal Election Commission (FEC) to enforce the law.

During the 2000 election, the campaign of John McCain, the Arizona senator running in the Republican presidential primary, proved that the Net could broaden fundraising power from a few individuals to the general population: By mid-February 2000, it had raised about $4.3 million online – more than 25 percent of overall funds raised – compared with $1.1 million by Al Gore's campaign and $350,000 by George W. Bush's. McCain's success (and now Dean's as well) persuaded campaign managers and political consultants to integrate the Net into their fundraising activities.

This movement created a lucrative market for campaign-management tool vendors with fundraising components, including San Francisco-based Convio, founded in April 1999; NGP Software, founded in 1997 and serving mostly Democratic organizations and candidates; and Campaign Solutions from The Donatelli Group, similar to NGP but for Republican organizations.

These vendors are being challenged by upstarts (some of which we cover below) building more flexible campaign-management systems, most with support for multi-level fundraising. They are responding to a more recent shift in fundraising

power, due to the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, better known as McCain-Feingold (co-sponsored by McCain and Senator Russell Feingold, a Democrat), which prohibits the national parties from raising and spending soft money in most instances. (Think of it as the Sarbanes-Oxley of politics.) As a result, "shadow parties" of nonprofit, often issue-driven 527 organizations have sprung up to fill the gap. These initially smaller, more diverse operations are not as strictly regulated by the FEC and are therefore freer to raise funds and operate as they choose. (While the FEC decided to not regulate 527's for the 2004 election, it may do so in the future.)

With the big money starting to shift to 527's, campaign fundraisers, the DNC and RNC, and less high-profile nonprofits are looking online, for a higher volume of smaller contributions.

For their part, 527's are looking for Web-based tools to raise funds, expand membership and run their own operations.

Garnering support/getting out the vote

While the online activities of the Dean campaign helped it raise $40 million in 2003 – the most raised by a Democratic candidate in 2003 – they did not translate into wins in the primary elections; Dean didn't win a single state. Dean supporters point out that while he didn't win any primaries, he won thousands more votes than pundits expected when he first joined the race; some attribute those votes to the open, Net-embracing strategy of his campaign.

Still, most political campaigns use only tried and true tactics to amass votes. To get out their message before the election, they both buy advertisements and create events that produce "earned media" for the candidate, i.e. coverage in newspapers, on television. . .or even on late-night comedy shows, where younger people get much of their current-event news.

To succeed on election day, campaigns rely on a network of supporters with proven ability to raise funds and get out the vote; the long-term relationship that matters is not the one with the voters, but with this social/political network. "Campaigns already have the concept of social networking down," quips Dickert. "They just call it 'politics.'"

But new tools being developed give the established support network – and even ad-hoc activists with no affiliation to a campaign or party – tools to build, manage and

grow their own political/social network and spur its members to action. Friend-to-friend campaigning has a much higher rate of success than stranger-to-stranger: Alice is more likely to listen to her friend Juan's pitch than to one from Joe Marketer. In turn, she is more likely to get involved afterwards. Think of it as a political pyramid scheme – or more kindly, the Tupperware approach to politics.

Then again, Alice may not like Juan as much as he likes her, or she may feel that her privacy has been violated if he contacts her seemingly out of the blue.

Activism: Net change?

Advocates of Net-based, two-way political activity look to the power of the grassroots to effect systemic change. As a predictor of their success, they point to individuals' increasing use of the Net to get information about candidates and politics: The Pew study cited above found that while most people still get information about candidates from TV news, daily newspapers and radio, from 2000 to 2004 the number of people who follow the campaigns online grew 9 percentage points, from 24 percent to 33 percent.

The Net also broadens the range of who's talking: Its ever-simpler tools for publishing (such as blogs) and communicating give ad-hoc grassroots organizations tremendous power to organize, to spread information about their activities, and to run advocacy campaigns that induce action from their members: Members of MoveOn just have to submit their zip code and a letter for or against a bill being considered in Congress is sent to their representative. The downside to this simplicity is that the sheer volume of communication could overwhelm the existing mechanisms for "listening" to public opinion and *dilute* the impact of these activities.

And while the Net has improved communication and action from the grassroots up and among grassroots organizations, on the whole, the IT-facilitated conversation between the elected and the citizens who elect them has been one-way. Once the candidate is elected, maintaining a direct relationship with individual voters becomes far less important. However, formal and informal polling activity does continue: Polling firms study trends, interest groups meet with the official, interns gather press clippings and document media coverage. . .and local officials walk the streets or attend community meetings in their district to hear complaints and suggestions.

Despite the arguments against "direct democracy," there are instances where direct involvement by individuals in a specific decision is advantageous to an official and

for the community as a whole. When faced with making decisions about controversial issues such as budget cuts or allocation of limited funds, engaging public feedback provides what is called "cover" in political circles: "You might dislike my cuts in education, but 67 percent of the public agreed that it was the only way!" Besides, a public event will attract media coverage – a politician's bread and butter.

In the past, "cover" was provided mainly by interest groups that represented a large bloc of voters. But the advent of 527 organizations and the development of Net-based campaign-management and demand-aggregation applications allow groups focusing on a specific decision to serve the same purpose.

This is where blogs can also offer powerful voices that inform and often express the views of their readers, not just to politicians but to other voters and the press. Blogs also affect the speed at which stories unfold off the Net, and their longevity: In 2002, bloggers kept alive the story of Trent Lott's racist comments long enough for him to be pressured into resigning as Senate Majority Leader. And in a sign of their growing power and influence, this year bloggers received press credentials for both the Democratic and Republican presidential conventions for the first time.

In short, technology will draw the attention of politicians to the extent that it is successfully used to threaten or to broaden their traditional centers of power.

Campaign-in-a-box

Most election veterans agree with Don Means, the political activities coordinator at Meetup, when he says, "Ask a professional pol about the value of a volunteer and they will try to avoid answering. The traditional market value has been about zero. The management overhead is equal to or greater than the average volunteer's contribution. A person's potential as donor is still the measure." But technologists who understand the zero-sum nature of the electoral process (as opposed to the value-added of getting citizens involved in governance) see how the right technology, applied intelligently, can change those economics. If a campaign gives up just a bit of its central control, volunteers can organize themselves and have a real impact on the results of an election – bypassing the raise money, buy TV, raise more money cycle.

At least that's what the advocates say. The elected officials and their political consultants need to see the theory proven in practice. "Centralized control has its prob-

lems," says Jonah Seiger, founder of Washington, DC-based political consultancy Connections Media (and a speaker at the 2004 PC Forum), "but at least one lesson from the Dean campaign implosion is that the tension between the nodes on the network and the center can create problems in trying to articulate a consistent message across the national media." For better or worse, political campaigning has become a fairly refined science; giving message-making power to local groups would transform that science into a collaborative art project.

Adds Jon Lebkowsky, an early Dean supporter and longtime head of Electronic Frontier Foundation Austin: "Like a new company, a campaign requires a different sort of energy in growth mode early on, than it does in management mode."

While over time candidates and their campaign advisors may change their attitudes about distributed power and decision-making, they do recognize that there are some efficiencies to running a campaign online: Fewer field offices means less overhead, and online fundraising driven by independent, grassroots activists saves the candidate from "wasting time" at $2,000-per-plate plate dinners – though important donors will still demand their schmooze time.

Below we sketch a few of the vendors and developers in this space. AdvoKit supports voter-ID and get-out-the-vote activities. For-profit Orchid for Change and nonprofit (for now) CivicSpace Labs offer full campaign-management suites that integrate (to varying degrees) the functionality of AdvoKit. I Stand For also offers an integrated campaign-management suite, but with social networking as well.

AdvoKit: The killer app

"I find the political scene the most nihilistic that I've seen, from a business perspective," says Dan Robinson, CTO of AdvoKit. Before becoming involved with the Dean campaign Robinson hadn't been involved in electoral politics, but he had been an activist, organizing peace groups opposing US intervention in Nicaragua and Central America in the 80's.

As we suggest above, the best way to convince politicians to adopt the Internet is to help them win an election, which translates into getting their supporters to the polls. "As technologists we are trying to create something to please the end-user, the politicians," says Robinson. "But I need to approach them through the lens of the masses of people." The AdvoKit team has been working closely with 501(c)(3) organizations to elicit requirements necessary for their non-partisan voter education and mobi-

lization efforts, but the software is available for free on its public website for partisan activities or anyone else.

AdvoKit is an open-source toolkit to manage volunteers in their "voter ID" and get out the vote (GOTV) activities. Voter ID involves door-to-door or phone canvassing to identify supporters and rank them in terms of level of support, collecting demographic and issue-preference information from voters, ensuring voters have the information they need in order to make a decision. . .or to defend and proselytize the decision they have already made, and collecting orders from supporters for campaign paraphernalia such as lawn signs and posters. It also helps manage election-day GOTV activities, which entail anything from calling the voters and knocking on doors to driving them to the polls to vote.

The first version of the software was written by AdvoKit product manager Pat Dunlavey to manage campaigns about local issues such as tax referendums for schools in Massachusetts. Since then, veteran grassroots organizers from the campaigns of Dean, Wes Clark and Dennis Kucinich have been working on an enhanced version. The organizers and programming partners Orchid for Change (below) built the latest version, still formally in beta. The software uses MySQL and PHP and runs on Linux or Windows. The team is confident it will be well tested by Labor Day, which is when the voter ID and GOTV activities for the upcoming national election will begin in earnest.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">ADVOKIT INFO</td></tr>
<tr><td>Headquarters: www.advokit.net</td></tr>
<tr><td>Founded: January 2004</td></tr>
<tr><td>Employees: 5 paid and 5 volunteers</td></tr>
<tr><td>Funding: $65,000 from The Tides
    Foundation and several anonymous
    donors</td></tr>
<tr><td>Key metric: software in beta</td></tr>
<tr><td>URL: www.advokit.net</td></tr>
</table>

To start a campaign, the lead organizer can install AdvoKit at its ISP or pay an ASP to install and maintain the software. He can create a voter ID or GOTV campaign that follows the traditional hierarchical, controlled structure of a political campaign, or a flatter structure that is easier to scale but more difficult to control: Opponents potentially could register as a volunteer and sabotage the campaign from within. However, says Robinson, "We are focused on grassroots organizations where each volunteer is interacting with other volunteers on a regular basis, making this kind of abuse difficult to pull off."

AdvoKit can import publicly available voter registration data or data purchased from commercial list vendors. If the campaign doesn't involve voters, an organizer can import or manually enter her own contacts to build the campaign around her personal network, or can collect contacts from volunteers and activists (or from spam-list brokers, for that matter).

Once a campaign is set up, anyone can go to the campaign website and volunteer for an open position. Volunteers can be added to the campaign (or add themselves, in the case of a flat structure) and can get the ability to create their own campaign branch of volunteers. Those in leadership positions have access to the information of any other person below them in the hierarchy, to keep tabs on their activities.

An organizer can segment the voter file by geographic location or demographic data, so volunteers have access only to certain voters. Within that data segment, the volunteer can search by voter name, street name, zip code, local representative, party affiliation and any other data in the database. "Our inspiration was friend-to-friend campaigning," explains Henri Poole, AdvoKit's business manager, former technology manager for the Kucinich campaign, and CEO of Affero, a reputation and rating service for any sort of online work (SEE **RELEASE 1.0**, OCTOBER 2003). "A person can do a search of their neighborhood, choose the neighbors they know and like and do their own calling."

So far, the project is sponsored by Evolve, a non-profit working to integrate Internet-based grassroots organizing tools and techniques into organizations working for social change, and funded through grants from the Tides Foundation (which also supports Groundspring.org; see page 20) and several anonymous donors interested in citizen participation and civic engagement, according to Poole. "There are opportunities for commercializing it, but not through restricting the distribution of the software," he says.

The current price (free) is right for tech-savvy, activist nonprofit users such as America Coming Together or Indyvoter. In fact, Verified Voting, a group of technologists who have volunteered to ensure the integrity of the upcoming elections, will use a version of AdvoKit to coordinate their activities across the country. The AdvoKit toolkit will be offered via the Affero general public license (AGPL), a variant of the GPL that requires any enhancements to be shared publicly and for free.

So far, says Poole, "Hosting services, training outfits, list vendors and campaign strategists are interested in AdvoKit, because it's a way to increase the market and therefore their revenue. It's like the US highway system: The infrastructure is public, but hotels and gas stations are making money around the infrastructure." Right now potential AdvoKit customers are using expensive – and more feature-rich – proprietary solutions from companies such as Artistotle and the Voter Activation Network.

Orchid for Change: Flowerishing

Orchid for Change is a division of Orchid Suites, a for-profit venture that provides affordable Web technologies to progressive organizations. Orchid for Change provides campaigns, political parties and other multi-tiered organizations a full suite of tools for fundraising, website content management, e-mail communication and list management, along with AdvoKit's voter ID/GOTV functionality. But what makes OFC unique, says co-founder and CEO Tanya Renne, is the ability of its customers to share content across a network of sites on the OFC system. "It creates an entire content-sharing and communications network," she says.

The system, offered as an ASP, uses a common framework and architecture based on open-source applications. Through RSS feeds and XML files created by the OFC content-management system, a site in a network can subscribe to and re-publish content from any other network site: event calendars, issue statements, press releases, news, or any other content that its creator makes available. For example, she says, "The Maryland Democratic Party's purpose is just to beat on [Republican Governor Robert Ehrlich]. That's where they spend their resources; they don't prepare issue statements. So they just republish the issue statements that people in other states develop."

In theory, a network could share volunteers as well. But managing people's time – especially volunteers, who have donated their time to a particular organization or cause – brings up difficult social and political issues.

> **ORCHID FOR CHANGE INFO**
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> Headquarters: Washington, DC
> Founded: February 2004
> Employees: 5 full time, 3-4 contractors
> Funding: bootstrapped; looking for
> $300-500,000 in funding
> Key metric: its 100 customers require
>   just 1 hour per week in helpdesk
>   support
> URL: www.orchidforchange.com

All the sites have to use the OFC service and affiliate themselves in order to share content. But its clever pricing strategy, which favors volume over high price – it charges just $50 per month – helps build out the network quickly. It also gives customers revenue incentives to recruit other organizations below them in a network hierarchy. For instance, once a state party is a customer – say, the Ohio Democratic Party, OFC's first political customer – the company gives back 5 percent of the $50 subscription fees from customers the state party recruits: affiliated districts, counties, local committees, caucuses, clubs or other Democratic organizations in that state. "So the state party does a lot of the marketing. I'm not interested in their $50. I'm interested in the $50 from each of the 240 counties," says Renne.

So far, 17 state parties are Orchid for Change customers, and Renne hopes to have 22 by the end of the year. Volume is the key. The company earns revenue from the subscription fee and extra fees for design and technical services.

CAMPAIGN OF ONE: AN EXPERIMENT IN GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING

It seems that any investigation into politics and technology currently turns up mostly former Dean supporters and progressive-minded technologists. Brian Kennedy, the former chairman of the Republican Party of Iowa and current lawyer/lobbyist at DCI Group in Washington, DC, is one of the exceptions. "We're the party of less government, small business and free enterprise. It seems only natural that we would translate that into our politics," he begins. "We should be less like IBM and more like entrepreneurs and small businesses, all working concert to win an election. In doing so, I think we'll be more effective."

Kennedy is taking this message to the leadership of the Republican party. To prove his theory, he has launched Campaign of One, a Political Action Committee (funded by individual donations) and an experiment in decentralized grassroots activism.

Kennedy says volunteers are not interested in talking to strangers, so phone banks are not the way to reach voters. In the old days, he says, "ward bosses would know everyone. Now, people don't know [their] neighbors anymore. The social dynamics changed." And campaigns compete with work and family for an individual's time and attention. "We need to give people tasks and the tools to accomplish them on their own time."

The primary goal of CO is to support offline grassroots efforts to inform voters about issues and persuade them to vote Republican. "The old way of saturating the airwaves with political ads isn't as effective anymore," he claims. "The power of peer-to-peer communication is the future," he retorts, "and it won't be as effective if we try to channel and control it."

Imagine! Except for the "vote Republican" part, he sounds like every other activist quoted in this issue. If a non-partisan, for-profit volunteer-management software company needs a customer, we would guess Kennedy would be interested. Right now his operation uses fairly rudimentary and unintegrated technology, including weblog software his "IT guy" developed. As it should: For this election cycle, CO is just an experiment in Iowa a key swing state in the upcoming presidential election.

If CO is successful, Kennedy plans to take the story to the Republican party as a whole in 2006. His plan is to convince campaigns to adopt this strategy wholesale, even encouraging people to fund their own projects instead of contributing to the campaign. "It would shift the dynamics of grassroots politics," he says.

Before founding Orchid for Change, Renne was a freelance Web developer for very small nonprofits. "Everyone was paying me all this money to build the same functionality over and over. If you think about it, the Industrial Age brought us the concept of interchangeable parts. . .until Internet age, when we went back to building everything from scratch every time." So she developed the first version of Orchid for Change and started selling it to the labor market. "We sold it to Iron Workers International. If you can get them up-to-date, you can sell to anyone," she says. Her friends in the Democratic Party pressured her to sell to the party, and all of a sudden OFC was in the political software space.

As far her target market after the election, Renne will look to groups that already are as (fairly) decentralized and tiered as the Democratic Party: the National Women's Political Caucus, labor and the like. But she hopes other types of organizations will find OFC useful as well: "Say I'm a member of the Sierra Club and I am trying to clean up the dirty river in my town. Someone else in the next town over is also organizing about *their* dirty river. Lo and behold, it's the same river and it's dirty there, too! If we are connected we can build regional consciousness around an issue, but with the clout of the Sierra Club."

These organizations have to let the grassroots drive local issue campaigns, she says. "That's where people care. And when you let people get involved locally, you start to change the whole national fabric."

CivicSpace Labs: Delivering the promise of DeanSpace

CivicSpace Labs is the offshoot of DeanSpace, a software toolkit built by a group of Dean supporters/technologists to facilitate their grassroots activities. "Our vision was to build software to run your local Dean group, to create a network of these Dean groups that connect with each other and share users, events and ideas, and to connect with the campaign," explains CivicSpace Labs founder Zack Rosen. Rosen became involved with the Dean campaign in May 2003 while on summer vacation from the University of Illinois. By August, he was working on the campaign full time, both writing code for DeanSpace and coordinating Web development for state campaigns and constituency groups – some of which were official Dean organizations but most of which were independent efforts.

In October 2003, DeanSpace co-creator Josh Koenig was hired at Music For America, a nonprofit focused on using the connection between culture and politics to get out the youth vote. Through Koenig, Rosen met one of the MFA funders, Skyline Public Works founder Andy Rappaport, a partner at August Capital who is bring a VC's mindset to political funding. Rosen pitched CivicSpace Labs, a foundation to support open-source development of free advocacy/campaign tools.

> **CIVICSPACE LABS INFO**
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> Headquarters: Redwood City, CA
> Founded: March 2004
> Employees: 2 full-time, 2 interns, 4-5 contractors
> Funding: ~$75,000 from Skyline Public Works and Mitch Kapor
> Key metric: 10 sites "with budgets behind them" and 15 others using the toolkit; version 1.0 will be released in a few weeks
> URL: www.civicspacelabs.org

"Right now, if you're a nonprofit organization and want to set up a website, you have to contract with an ASP – unless you want to write all the code yourself," says Rosen. "But in some respects, ASP tools [except Orchid for Change, above!] are pretty far behind what we have" in the CivicSpace toolkit, most of which is open-source and free to use under a general public license.

Like Orchid for Change, CivicSpace software supports information-sharing laterally across a network of like-minded but independently operated sites via RSS feeds and other XML files. The software adds to and customizes the tools in Drupal, an open-source content-management and collaboration system that supports user administration, blogging, news aggregation, and metadata management capabilities that make it easy to share content across sites.

Before Rosen joined it, the Dean campaign used Convio's content management system. "We outgrew it almost immediately," says Rosen. "It didn't have the 'get local' tools. It didn't have social networking. The content management system was very expensive resource-wise, and didn't interoperate with any other system. We do." (Dickert says the Kerry campaign also used and outgrew Convio.)

In the short term, CSL is finishing the DeanSpace project: "everything you need to run a small, local campaign," says Rosen, including member management, fundraising, content management, a weblog and event organizing. CSL is now integrating the AdvoKit voter ID/GOTV software (PAGE 10) and working to interoperate with owners of data sources such as VoterPunch, which tracks the voting records of Congresspeople, and ActBlue, a website that makes it easy for people to solicit donations for different candidates from one place. In theory, says Rosen, "You could mouse over a senator's name and see an icon with their voting record, who funded them, etc."

CSL plans to fund further feature development via third-party donors and donations from the organizations that adopt its platform. "We will build a laundry list of features and hit them up for money to develop them," says Rosen. The organization is also working with ISPs and hosting companies to build a CivicSpace public service that can be installed once and used by many.

I Stand For. . .social networking

Open-source, do-it-yourself campaign-management software is great, but most political campaigns have neither the aptitude nor the desire to configure, customize or integrate all these systems; they all need one solution, says Andrew Weinreich, who in 1995 founded SixDegrees.com, an early social-networking company that he sold to YouthStream Media for $125 million in stock in 2000 (SEE RELEASE 1.0, NOVEMBER 2003). In November 2003 he launched I Stand For, which offers just such a solution as an ASP.

"If your goal is to get elected, you raise money and spend it on marketing dollars," says Weinreich. "I don't know if politicians get how cost-effective it is to sell online." Even more cost-effective, he says, is to build a community to do some of that work for you. "The goal is to allow the effective creation of the community, but also to grow the community. Social networking is necessary to grow a community."

The story of his immersion in the campaign-management software space is a case in point. "I had been watching what Dean was doing online and how powerful it was and saw a huge opportunity. [Then] I met [Presidential hopeful] Wes Clark at a party and was inspired by my meeting with him."

With Jeff Ross, his former senior architect at SixDegrees, Weinreich designed and built I Stand For, a set of modular, integrated components for campaign management. "If it's not all integrated, it's a nightmare for the user – both the supporter and the campaign," he says.

The suite of tools, built around Microsoft SQL, includes components for what Weinreich calls the "five C's: constituent relations, content, commerce, communication and community." The tools allow the campaign to manage its supporter outreach as well as to operate a website to make available information about the candidate and campaign events, raise funds, and give organizing and community tools to its supporters. Predictably, I Stand For differentiates itself from other campaign-management suites by focusing more on social networking.

I STAND FOR INFO
Headquarters: New York, NY
Founded: November 2003
Employees: 8
Funding: self-funded, for-profit
Key metric: 15 customers
URL: www.istandfor.com

As with other social-networking tools, members create a personal profile with their age, gender, location and area or issue of interest. Other members then link to and submit testimonials about their friends in the community. Depending on the settings of the website, members can follow links across their network, from friend to friend. And later this month, I Stand For will roll out tools with expanded social-networking capability, where members can search fellow supporters by name, interest, location or any other information that supporters choose to make public.

Members also can create their own fundraising pages and organize their own campaign events. For example, if an Alice wants to throw a house party for candidate Juan, I Stand For gives her the tools to announce it on the public campaign calendar, send invitations to her social network, collect money from ticket sales and manage RSVPs.

I Stand For also offers consulting services to link to other tools with functionality it does not yet have. For instance, it integrates with regulatory reporting and donor management (i.e. "you need to call this person at 10 o'clock") tools from NGP Software and Aristotle, and with website traffic analytics tools from Web Trends.

Most of the company's 15 current customers are political campaigns, including those of Senator Chris Dodd, Senator Maria Cantwell and a number of state senate and city council races. Nonprofit customers include Operation Truth and the Drum Major Institute for Public Policy.

Nonprofit-in-a-box

Not all politics has to do with explicitly political organizations. Member-based organizations from labor unions to the NRA hold significant power among their members and influence their votes. They also may hold *more* power than distinctly political organizations in that they build and maintain long-term relationships with their members, whereas most politicians seem to want people to give them money, show up to vote, and then just communicate using established channels: letter-writing, phone calls to the right numbers, and more donations.

GetActive and get organized

GetActive sells online communication and relationship management software/services to (mainly) nonprofits and member-based organizations. It grew out of an Internet services project at the Environmental Defense Fund, whose online action network (ACTIONNETWORK.ORG), was first deployed in 1999. "It was one of the first attempts to use the Net to engage constituents and encourage them to participate," says GetActive CEO Sheeraz Haji, who previously ran product development for e-mail marketing firm Digital Impact and co-founded GetActive in June 2000. Haji first met GetActive CTO and co-founder Bill Pease, who previously served as director of Internet projects for EDF, through Bob Grady, a managing director of the Carlyle Group and a former member of the senior President Bush's Office of Management and Budget. "I was blown away by the passion and ingenuity of the team," Haji recalls.

"Other nonprofits saw what they were doing and thought it was cool," he continues. They started contacting the EDF to see if they could license the technology. "Bill said, 'I'm not a sales guy! I just work at a nonprofit.' So I asked if I could join, to see if I could sign contracts and make money," Haji recalls. The EDF agreed, and in June 2000 exchanged the rights to the technology for a long-term service contract with GetActive, co-founded by Haji, Pease, Bob Epstein (now chairman), and four others.

The GetActive software is a suite of Web publishing and customer relationship management (CRM) tools designed specifically for large-scale, federated nonprofit membership organizations such as charities, labor organizations, educational institutions, and professional or trade associations. Clients can choose from a variety of components, all of which rely on a central membership-management module that tracks any interaction a member may have with the organization, such as attendance at an event, participation in grassroots advocacy activities and donations. In addition to components for personalized e-mail marketing, fundraising and advocacy, GetActive offers events management – everything from event calendars to registration pages to ticket purchasing – and community tools with which members can create their own Web pages and communicate with their own contacts. It offers client support and professional services as well.

One customer, John Edwards' presidential campaign, used GetActive to establish personal, segmented, two-way communications with constituents. By soliciting feedback from constituents and donors on the issues that most concerned them, the campaign was able to target e-mail messages, event alerts and donation appeals based on those preferences. Constituents could also create their own fundraising pages: "They got 4000 people to create their own mini-fundraising campaigns in a week," says Haji. "Those individuals could then create their own campaigns that were personalized." Individuals could also send e-mail appeals – for a specific action, to raise money, or any other appeal – to anyone.

Contacts are not added to an organization's database until an action is taken on the website or the person asks to be added to the official campaign list. How many times a particular person is solicited depends entirely on the other individuals who know and solicit him. While this decentralized, personal approach solves one major problem with political e-mail – political campaigns are notorious spammers – it also puts a mass-mailing tool in the hands of potentially overzealous fundraisers. And the more "friends" a person has, the more "solicitation spam" he'll receive.

Despite this success among politicians, "It is a relatively uninteresting market for us, from a business perspective," says Epstein, founder of Sybase and active environmentalist (who spoke at this year's PC Forum). "[Electoral politics] is a lumpy business, because of the election cycle." In contrast, membership organizations offer a steadier and more profitable market because they strive to build and maintain long-

GETACTIVE INFO
Headquarters: Berkeley, CA
Founded: June 2000
Employees: 55
Funding: $1 million from individuals including Bob Epstein, Lisa Gansky, executives from McKinsey
Key metric: expect $7 million in 2004 revenue; profitable for 2 years
URL: www.getactive.com

term relationships with their members, whereas politicians (perhaps foolishly) tend to dump the community as soon as the election ends. "In politics, relationship management dissipates after the election," says Epstein.

The company's first big sale, in 2000, was to the AFL/CIO, which communicates with 13 to 15 million members. GetActive's 350 clients include many major national wildlife protection organizations, Planned Parenthood, the Public Broadcasting Service, the University of California, the US Chamber of Commerce, and the presidential campaigns of Dick Gephardt and Edwards. After starting operations with $1 million in funding, the company has been profitable for about two years, and expects about $7 million in revenues this year. As an ASP, GetActive's pricing depends on the number of records in the database and the modules in use.

But selling to nonprofits still can be harrowing, admits Haji. "Nonprofits are risk-averse, and there's a much more consensus approach to making decisions. When we were selling to the AFL/CIO, all their member unions were involved with all the demos. So the sales cycle is much longer" than selling to most for-profit companies. . .but, as with political campaign managers, probably more faithful customers.

And local civics organizations? "When you get too local," replies Epstein, "the required campaign skills and resources aren't there. Real value is created when someone who knows how to use the tools is able to build a communication effort around an issue." That's where these standard tools and processes can come in handy. "In Berkeley there was a desire to take an empty field and turn it into a baseball park. The 'Friends of Derby Street' weren't using a tool [to organize themselves]. I recommended that they implement GetActive, and in a matter of weeks the school board was overwhelmed by responses. It was just a couple hundred people, but they weren't used to that."

Groundspring.org – The little guy's GetActive

"Our mission is to help small and medium-sized nonprofits use the Internet well," states Dan Geiger, executive director of Groundspring.org. It's a nonprofit ASP that provides online donation and member-management services to small-to-medium sized public charities and other nonprofits. Before joining Groundspring in 2001, Geiger was the founding CEO of Opnet, an organization that prepared low-income young people for careers using IT. In the '80s he served as an account executive at Wang Laboratories, leaving in the early '90s to pursue philanthropy and fundraising (and pick up an MBA from UC Berkley along the way).

Groundspring was founded as eGrants.org in 1999 by Drummond Pike, the founder and president of Tides Foundation. Tides, which also funded AdvoKit (above), gives grants to community-based nonprofit organizations and the progressive movement.

To date, Groundspring has helped its customers raise almost $9 million in donations. According to Geiger, there are about 1 million public charities in the US, and about 90 percent have budgets under $500,000/year. Groundspring, which itself has an operating budget of more than $2 million, primarily serves this under-$500,000 budget sector and leaves the complicated needs of large national and multinational nonprofits to the for-profit vendors.

By Geiger's own account, Groundspring "gives [clients] 80 percent of what for-profit service providers can do, but at 20 percent of the cost." Its open-source toolkit offers capabilities similar to those offered by GetActive, Convio, Kintera and other companies: Web-based fundraising, member management/e-mail marketing and advocacy-campaign support. It also offers eBase, a downloadable, free (but not open-source) donor-management system that runs on Filemaker database software. By the end of this year, Groundspring hopes to have released a beta version of an open-source version of eBase, tentatively called Enterprise, which it will offer as an ASP. George Soros's Open Society Institute has funded the development of an international version of Enterprise.

GROUNDSPRING INFO
Headquarters: San Francisco, CA
Founded: July 1999
Employees: 20
Funding: $2 million per year from the Open Society Institute, and the Ford, W.K. Kellogg, Surdna, Omidyar and Skoll Foundations
Key metric: nonprofit; hopes to be self-sustaining by 2008 (!!)
URL: www.groundspring.org

Groundspring doesn't offer the sophisticated social-networking tools other vendors provide to expand membership. But it does offer vendor-neutral training services to educate nonprofits about operating on the Internet.

Its 1,100 customers pay a small setup fee per component (from $50 to $200) and then a monthly fee ranging from $14.95 to $49.95, depending on the service and usage. In contrast, users of GetActive might pay thousands of dollars in setup fees. . .and get more feature-rich, robust technology. Groundspring's plan is to grow its customer base to 5,000 by 2008, which would make it self-sustaining.

The Groundspring development team is led by CTO Donald Lobo, Yahoo!'s first engineer. Yahoo! was also an open source shop originally, and still uses open-source applications in some cases, says Geiger. One aspect of the mission of the organization is to "use open source as a metaphor for revitalizing democracy and to help the open-

source software development community have an impact on civil society," says Geiger. To that end, a native Polish Groundspring programmer is translating the software into Polish and will set up an ASP in Poland to help Polish NGOs by early 2005. Lobo plans to do the same with the English version to help NGO's in his native India.

Geiger points out that the open source approach also saves money for the public sector: The use of the GPL reduces the amount of money Groundspring has to spend on engineering, so it can spend its grant money on other things. "The pragmatic benefits of open-source software are just starting to be seen in the technology industry," he says. "The same thing will happen in democracy."

Activism-in-a-box

While a candidate creates and runs on a platform for people to vote on in a winner-take-all election, the platform that wins rarely reflects all the nuances of the opinions and priorities of those who voted for it. The real world works more like a market, where the idea that wins does not do so to the exclusion of its opposite (or its cousin).

At their best, developers of activist technology encourage a lightly regulated marketplace of opinions and stances.

Meetup.com is helping individuals with similar interests to find each other locally, and now to formalize themselves and connect with larger national or international networks around each interest. MoveOn is helping progressive activists coalesce around political issues or stances and take action. Web Lab and one of its clients, America*Speaks*, combine clever technology, knowledge about group dynamics and a deep understanding of the governance process to squeeze change out of rigid political systems.

Meetup.com: From private interest to public interest

Meetup started with a simple idea: to use the asynchronous, "safe," community-building power of the Web to bring together people with similar interests in the real world. (SEE **RELEASE 1.0**, JULY 2002 AND MARCH 2004.)

Members either follow links to Meetup topic pages or search Meetup.com for groups of people who share their interests – knitting, Star Trek, speaking French, and thou-

sands more – and meet in real-world places – cafés, bars, bookstores, and so on. Meetup coordinates timing of simultaneous events around the country and around the world. Meetup the company receives a fee from the meeting venues, the venues get revenue and possibly repeat business from the Meetuppers and the Meetuppers gather and get to know other members from their location.

In early 2003, the company noticed an odd phenomenon: All of a sudden, the Meetup topic with the most members was Dean for America. The "you have the power" message of the Dean campaign had inspired supporters from around the world to use Meetup to coordinate activities. "When you let people organize themselves, they can act politically," says founder and CEO Scott Heiferman, who previously founded Internet advertising agency i-traffic in 1995. After Dean supporters flexed their fundraising muscle, a media frenzy ensued, and Meetup rode the Dean campaign's coattails into the spotlight.

Now there are Meetups for members of every political stripe, from supporters of candidates (Kerry, Bush, and hundreds of candidates in state and local elections), to activists with an agenda (Bull Moose Republicans, Outsourced Workers, Women Voters, etc.) or those interested in a particular issue (Animal Rights, Free Tibet, Lower Property Taxes, etc.).

A recent Bentley College study of political Meetuppers found that 42 percent of the attendees either become involved or planned to become involved in a political campaign after attending, 57 percent had already been active, and just 1 percent didn't plan on getting involved further. Unlike bloggers, who tend to be male and well-off, political Meetuppers skew female – 60 percent – and their incomes are fairly evenly distributed. But like bloggers, Meetuppers are predominately white. The average age of participants is 47, and political Meetups are responsible for about a third of the activity on the site – though that percentage has been shrinking since around January, according to Heiferman.

In early 2004 Don Means, a software consultant for community-building tools, joined Meetup part-time to coordinate political activities for an area of interest Meetup had not predicted. "Meetup [the site] has become a powerful political tool, and therefore [the company] must be extremely careful to not become political itself," Means explains. "Diebold voting machines and their activist CEO are the best example of the danger."

MEETUP INFO
Headquarters: New York, NY
Founded: March 2002
Employees: 30
Funding: undisclosed amounts from Draper Fisher Jurvetson, Pierre Omidyar, Esther Dyson and other individuals
Key metric: 1.4 million registered members
URL: www.meetup.com
Disclosure: Esther Dyson sits on the board

While there are Meetups supporting the more traditional campaigns of Bush and Kerry, says Means, "Meetup is more social [and self-organizing], which is where it runs into problems with the control freaks in politics. But they underestimate its value for relationship building. If people care, they do things." Carol Lukensmeyer, founder and president of America*Speaks* (PAGE 30), makes a similar argument: Once voters feel that an official listens to their opinions, they are more likely to support that official's agenda and next candidacy.

"Historically, [just] 0.5 percent of the population participates in electoral politics - either activism or donating money," says Means. "A big part of the reason for that is that it's just not easy." With the advent of tools to make participation easier, he predicts that percentage will continue to increase dramatically. "It's sort of like buying your first book on Amazon. Your finger is suspended over the 'submit' button for a second. But once you do it, it's no big deal. Before you know it, you've got a one-click account. The same thing will happen here."

To capitalize on its exposure and the jump in membership around the elections and to realize the company's long-term vision of a more active, involved populace, Meetup is expanding its offerings to enable and encourage the formation of long-term, sustainable local chapters of broader interest groups, instead of just meetings. Launching later this summer, the new structure will allow an individual to form a local "chapter" for any nationwide or worldwide Meetup topic/movement/association. The leader of the chapter – usually its original creator – will have access to a suite of Web-based organizational management tools, including a message board, a polling tool, calendaring and the ability to create events that require RSVPs. A weblog is established for every group automatically. "Like eBay and other network-driven properties, Meetup gets better for everyone as more people use it," says Heiferman.

Meetup will charge local Meetup chapters a monthly fee for access to these new capabilities. In addition to fees from venues, Meetup's current sources of revenue are premium individual membership fees, advertising and sponsorship.

Eventually, Meetup will roll out APIs of its software and start a developers' network much like eBay's, it says.

Its grand vision is to enable the adage, "think global; act local." Says Means: "Meetup will help spread democracy by example, not by foreign aid or proselytizing. Personally, I want everyone to Meetup, especially for political purposes. It constitutes a new form of participatory democracy."

He quickly catches himself: "Well, of course it's really the oldest form, but it is totally dependent on the Internet to happen [broadly].   I believe it may be the best way to encourage and spread democracy everywhere."

MoveOn.org: From process to software

To many, MoveOn is the gold standard of political activism online –in tactics, if not politics. It started with a 1998 e-mail petition by co-founders Wes Boyd and Joan Blades, who co-founded Berkeley Systems, the creator of the once-ubiquitous flying toaster screen saver. The first petition called for Congress to "censure President Clinton and move on to pressing issues facing the nation." After more than 100,000 people signed that petition, MoveOn was born.

The organization now boasts 2.5 million members and consists of three entities: MoveOn.org, a 501(c)(4) organization that focuses on national issues important to its membership; MoveOn PAC, a federal political action committee that supports progressive candidates; and MoveOn.org Voter Fund, a 527 organization that educates voters about candidates for public office.

The secret to MoveOn's success is that its process innovations drive the technology development, not the other way around: An idea for a kind of campaign is hatched by staff members and the technologists crank it out in a matter of days or weeks. It helps that most of the MoveOn staff have technology backgrounds, so they are able to communicate ideas to the developers quickly and clearly. Most of the technology tools were built by Patrick Michael Kane and three full-time developers from Kane's IT-consulting agency, We Also Walk Dogs (named after a Robert Heinlein short story). WAWD owns the licensing rights to any technology it builds for MoveOn. While Kane isn't on the MoveOn staff, he has consulted to MoveOn almost since it began.

The centerpiece of MoveOn's interaction with its members is its e-mail system, which can generate and send upwards of 1 million messages per hour. That's a key capability to run what Kane calls a "a flash campaign": If an important piece of legislation is coming to the House floor, "We can have an e-mail sitting in our members' mail boxes in 2 hours," he says. The e-mails can be targeted by Congressional district and include the phone number to call for that congressperson, or a link to a page on the MoveOn site that will send a form letter to the congressperson on the member's behalf. The MoveOn staff can customize every element of the e-mail message based on previous response by the member, level of interest in a particular issue, and more.

But communication with members does not consist only of directives. "Our job is to listen to our members and help them engage on issues they care about," explains Blades. To that end, the company built the Action Forum website, where members can post their ideas. Similar in functionality to the open-source Scoop Engine, Action Forum allows visitors to express their level interest in a particular idea on a scale of 1 to 5 and indicate whether they agree or disagree that it's important. The front page of the site lists the top-rated and most recent postings. "It's a means by which we get a good sense of what tens of thousands of our members are passionate about," says Blades.

Another innovation was a website to coordinate house parties and other meetings. Like Meetup, site visitors can type in their zip code and find meetings in their area. But since MoveOn isn't trying to make money from the meetings, they don't generally take place in commercial venues. For example, most recently MoveOn members have organized (cell) phone banks in parks to register voters and, separately, house parties to discuss "Fahrenheit 9/11" in their homes.

When the MoveOn staff gets an idea for real-world meetings – say, for watching John Kerry's candidacy acceptance speech – it sends a pre-invitation to members who previously hosted or attended meetings, inviting them to be a host. Any potential hosts who accept go to the MoveOn website and post a meeting. A day or so later, when the rest of the members receive an e-mail from MoveOn suggesting they attend a local Kerry-speech-watching meeting, they are more likely to find one in their area. Meeting hosts have access to a suite of tools to communicate with the members attending their meeting, to upload photos from the meeting, and to gather and submit feedback from attendees.

None of the specific technology components of MoveOn are earth-shattering, says Kane: "We are not breaking any new ground in computer science. We're just bringing it into the political space and being agile. In the political world, if it takes you a month to do something, it's game over."

Kane attributes the agility of MoveOn to three factors. First, projects are self-contained and specific to an issue or event. Second, the development is iterative and uses a "release early, release often" open-source-like approach. "That way, we get the results from the business side: Will people use it?" he explains. "And on the technology side, we discover which features we didn't implement and what features we don't need." If the organization finds itself using a particular module over and over

again – for instance, the meeting tool – the technology team redesigns and formalizes that module.

The third and most important factor in MoveOn's agility, says Kane, is its almost exclusive use of open-source software: Linux, Apache and MySQL. "None of this would have been possible without open source. It has served us well in two ways," he explains. "First, from a cost perspective. But more importantly, it has given us access to an incredible pool of talent."

The only proprietary software it uses (grudgingly, says Kane, though he stresses that it has been a godsend) is Maryland-based OmniTI's Ecelerity, a mail transfer agent (MTA) that allows MoveOn to deliver highly targeted e-mail messages 10 times faster than open-source solutions such as Sendmail. "The open source community creates what they need and find important," explains Kane. All the open-source MTAs are built for general mass mail: delivering the same message to many recipients quickly. Since MoveOn messages are hyper-customized, open-source MTAs "can only do 20 to 30 messages per second on our servers," says Kane. "Using Ecelerity stopped us from having to buy 10 mail servers. It was just the right thing to do," says Kane.

Both the Dean and Kucinich campaigns licensed the meeting technology from We Also Walk Dogs to supplement their activities on Meetup: While Meetups offered supporters a regularly-scheduled reason to get together, the MoveOn tool allowed the campaigns to call ad-hoc meetings and schedule events outside of commercial venues. The Dean campaign even built in additional functionality. In the future, MoveOn hopes to make some of its technology available under a general public license (GPL). But as Doc Searls explained on these pages a few months ago, open-sourcing code requires a lot of preparatory work on the part of the developer; you can't just throw the code out into the wild with no documentation. (SEE **RELEASE 1.0**, MAY 2004.)

But enough about technology! After all, Kane attributes MoveOn's success to its focus on the business and not on technology. The mission of MoveOn, says Blades, is "two-way communication [in politics]. Our politicians will be better representatives, and organizations will be better to their members. It's about becoming an active participant in the political conversation. That's going to revitalize democracy."

Web Lab: Small group dynamics

Congratulations! Your guy won the election. Now what? Involvement in political campaigns may serve as a catalyst for continued involvement in community affairs, but it's pretty obvious that, other than hard-core political junkies, few citizens are likely to remain involved in national politics past the election. For better or worse, it's easier for people to justify getting involved in local governance than in abstruse Washington politicking. Which may be a good thing. . .local involvement is valuable.

But local and national politicians still need proxy interest groups to create visible demand for their decisions and actions, to provide them with political cover. In the past, this "service" was provided by interest groups and other organizations that represent large groups of voters. But now Web-based applications such as Web Lab allow more ad-hoc groups focusing on a specific decision to serve the same purpose.

"In the typical bulletin board system [BBS] environment, the bad drives out the good [as Garrett Gruener discovered; see box page 31]. In a small group dialogue, most of the time the good drives out the bad," says Marc Weiss, founder and executive producer of Web Lab, which hosts and runs small group online dialogue sessions.

Before founding Web Lab, Weiss had spent many years in the independent film world, eventually producing a successful public TV documentary series called P.O.V. Though the series was successful, he says, "Many documentaries were made to be seen by a live audience, with a discussion after. So while P.O.V. reached several million people a week, we lost the ability to have the follow-up discussion." In 1994 he started experimenting with hosting chats on AOL following his shows, eventually migrating to asynchronous BBS discussions. In 1996, P.O.V. aired a documentary about Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. Viewers were invited to a website to submit stories about how the war had affected their lives and to discuss the unresolved issues around it. "The hope was to use the advantage of the passage of time and the anonymity of the Web to encourage people to talk in a new way," recalls Weiss. "The stories people submitted were wonderful, but [the reaction to and participation in] the dialogue was spectacular. It went on for more than a year, with fresh people, including veterans and former anti-war activists, coming in all the time. Some vets said they learned more about themselves in these discussions than they did in the previous 20 years. It was pretty inspiring."

He left P.O.V. in 1997 to found nonprofit Web Lab, with $175,000 from The MacArthur Foundation, as a center of experimentation with public-interest projects on the Web. Web Lab continued working with the P.O.V. series to produce websites

and dialogues. Some elicited little response, but "others, on hot-button issues, became flame wars," Weiss recalls, echoing Gruener. So the organization decided to rethink online discussions in a way that introduced accountability but maintained the openness of anonymity. It partnered with media-production firm GMD Studios to design software to run limited-term, asynchronous, lightly moderated small-group discussions. The Small Group Dialogue software, now built on top of a collaboration server from San Francisco-based Web Crossing, allows anyone to take part, but in a very structured way.

Before the discussion begins, participants register and create a profile, choosing a pseudonym, providing a short bio, and giving details such as gender, age, ethnicity, locale, and any other demographic data relevant to the particular discussion. For some discussions, participants also agree to basic standards of conduct. . .or are asked to suggest ground rules. The profile lasts only as long as that particular discussion – if the person participates again for a different topic, he is asked for a new profile. Each registrant is assigned to a group of up to 15 people that reflects the diversity of the group as a whole. Although anyone can read anyone's profile and messages posted to any group, participants can post messages or create new topics only in the group to which they were assigned.

Just before the discussion begins, the participants receive two e-mails: one letting them know which group they are in and another with a digest of bios of the others in their group. "They see at a glance how diverse their group is and that it's going to be an interesting group to take part in," says Weiss. It also serves to give the group an immediate sense of community – and the buy-in to feel accountable to each other and to the group as a whole. This self-regulation does work: In the fall of 1998, a discussion about the politics around the Clinton impeachment hearings went on for four months in 15 groups and saw 13,000 messages posted. None of the messages had to be deleted, and not one participant was ejected.

In fact, Web Lab has what Weiss calls "almost a religious precept" against intervening. When Web Lab moderators intervened in a few early discussions, says Weiss, "The dynamic changed. People would write to us and say, 'Can't you intervene?' So we decided to hold back next time. And someone from [inside] the group would always come in and mediate," instead of asking for outside help.

WEB LAB INFO

Headquarters: New York, NY

Founded: April 1997

Employees: 2

Funding (for the Small Group Dialogue project): $175,000 from The MacArthur Foundation

Key metric: Clinton impeachment discussion elicited 13,000 posts from 750 participants in 15 groups. . .and zero participants kicked out or asked to leave

URL: www.weblab.org/sgd

"After seven years doing this," says Weiss, "it still amazes me how quickly people become so intimate with each other." He ascribes this openness to the pseudonymity as well as to the fact that people feel freer to be more candid online. "There's also a group psychology," he continues. "The adventurous souls will break the barriers, and others will follow and find it exhilarating."

Just before the discussion is scheduled to end, members can vote on whether to keep the group and the conversation going. In one recent case, all 18 groups participating in a discussion among women with breast cancer voted to keep going. "That's atypical," admits Weiss, "but there is a tremendous sense of connection among group members." Sometimes so much trust develops among group members that they start posting with their real names and e-mail addresses. When Web Lab noticed that starting to happen, it built a private e-mail tool for members to use instead.

Other discussions that it has run include "Listening to the City," in partnership with America*Speaks*, to talk about what to do with the World Trade Center site. Because the object of that discussion was to make policy recommendations, Web Lab added a polling module to "take the temperature of the audience."

America*Speaks* was founded by Carol Lukensmeyer to bring about inclusive, practical, results-oriented interaction between public officials and citizens. Its gatherings are akin to town meetings, where discussions between officials and their constituents are face-to-face and the goal is to achieve a specific decision on an issue. The meetings are facilitated by technology it licenses from Web Lab and Covision. But Lukensmeyer makes it clear that technology is just a tool; the secret to creating a successful event is careful, thoughtful planning that leverages her years of experience and intimate knowledge of the workings of government, she says.

The main challenge is to ensure that the citizens involved represent the true affected population, not just the usual suspects or narrow interest groups. AS uses a matrix of age, gender, race, income and geography to accept or "wait list" people who offer to participate. America*Speaks* also makes sure that the political decision-makers are involved and have bought in to the process. Why would they defer their decision-making to citizens? "It's a paradox," she answers. "Politicians can't get what they want to get done, because they don't have a constituency to support them. So yes, they know they're giving up some power, but if it works, they are left with a knowledgeable, committed constituency to support them for what they want to do." In essence, a politician gives up some decision-making power in the short term in order to build a loyal, engaged, and empowered group that will support her on other pro-

GARRETT GRUENER: A (NON-DEAN!) EXPERIMENT IN OPEN ONLINE CAMPAIGNING

Garrett Gruener, venture capitalist and founder of AskJeeves, ran for governor of California during the recall election (but dropped out before the actual voting). No technology newbie, he consciously chose to use the tools of the Web to inform and interact with voters.

The Gruener for Governor website included more real content about the issues – a proposed budget, white papers, and videos of Gruener talking about his stance on various issues – than any other candidate, Gruener says. "The meta-message was first, this wasn't traditional politics, and second, that we had specific ideas and back up" information to explain those ideas. Linked to each key issue was a discussion board, where people contributed their own thoughts. "It was an imperfect mechanism," he says. "But it went to the point that these things are two-way." (Josh Ross, who developed Gruener's website, is now Director of Internet Strategy for the Kerry campaign.)

Eventually, however, Gruener decided to remove the discussion boards, for reasons Usenet fans will recognize: "The problem was that the bad [participants] drive out the good," he says. "The people who want to flame everyone drive out anyone who wants to have a coherent discussion." Perhaps he should have used Web Lab for his discussion area!

The website also included a blog that allowed comments. "The quality there was higher than the discussion boards," says Gruener. (That may be a passing phenomenon; blog spam is now a growing problem.)

Does he have any advice for politicians who want an interactive website? "If I had it to do over, I would have the same features," he insists. "But I would have more mediation, and a password-protected area for people who really did want to participate." Participants – including supporters and detractors – could graduate to the password-protected area by adding value to the campaign in some way, either taking part in intelligent debate or in a less vocal way, by volunteering or fundraising, he suggests. "You don't want to simply grade people's posts and invite them" into the password-protected discussion, he says. "You can use other pathways to find out if people are interested in participating. In open source, the cream rises to the top. In politics, you need recruitment. You go out of your way to bring people in, even if they're not necessarily for you. And if they use [your] bullhorn to say bad things, you need to figure out a way to escort them out."

In the days just before the election, Gruener threw his support behind Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante. Despite the potential headaches from using technology, Gruener believes growth in membership of political parties will be driven by its use. "In real life when you talk to someone, you don't immediately go into broadcast mode. If you're smart, you first find out what that person is interested in. So the right approach [for a candidate] is to turn [the current top-down approach] around. First find out what people are interested in, and then act on that basis."

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jects. . .or in other elections. And in her experience, "People will make compromises if they are involved. People want to take responsibility for their community."

With the right structure, says Lukensmeyer, Web "technology can develop safe public spaces that allow citizens themselves the ability to weave the collective wisdom of the general public, and to give officials the ability to receive it in context." While policymakers always want to tap into public opinion, she points out, "almost all of their listening to the public is mediated by others" such as pollsters and media consultants. "Technology can take that away."

As for Web Lab, with its early funding dried up, it now generates revenue by managing dialogues on contract basis – mostly for other nonprofits so far. The breast cancer dialogue, created in partnership with about a dozen prominent breast cancer organizations and called "First Person Plural," may be turned into a book (the proceeds of which would go to fund nonprofits and breast cancer research). And Weiss

sees obvious commercial applications for SGD "in education (college or graduate level, mostly) or for anyone in the communications business, such as the New York Times or a broadcast network or an ad agency, who wants to have discussions online." The organization has also been approached by "one big worldwide technology company that wanted to do discussion between the company and the public about environmental issues," he says.

While Web Lab and Web Crossing share rights to use or license the software, Web Lab has filed a for a patent – still pending – on the combination of techniques and elements used to create and guide its small-group online dialogues. But it has no plans to go commercial, says Weiss: "There's no reason for us to become a dot-com. We would lose all our tax advantages."

Politics Online, 2012?

Will the Internet and other technology change the face of politics to allow bottom-up (and lateral) communication participation instead of top-down broadcast and control? There are some promising signs: Bloggers instigated Senator Lott's ouster as Majority Leader, and in 2001 hundreds of thousands of Filipino protesters coordinated demonstrations against President Joseph Estrada via cell-phone text messages, eventually driving him out of office.

A more fundamental question to ask is: *Should* the current system of political participation be changed?

The examples above reflect the real-time coordinating power of new communication tools for ad-hoc, spontaneous political activity. Just as it is less necessary to make firm plans to meet friends ("I'll just call your cell. . ."), political participation can be looser and more ad-hoc ("Sure, I'll click the button to 'sign' the petition against nuclear power").

Many people building political technology operate under the assumption that friction-free politics allows a "more democratic" process because all voices can be heard – though not necessarily listened to. Some friction is necessary to read the real topology of the political landscape: If it is just as easy for me to sign a petition about

the environment, about which I care very deeply, as it is to sign a petition about a slight tax increase, about which I care a bit less, how will my representative understand what I believe? More importantly, if my representative is inundated with hundreds of different petitions, what will any of them really mean to her?

As political activity becomes easier to practice, its power is quickly diluted. Just as we need to learn how to judge content on the Net (versus knowing the difference between *The New York Times* and the *National Enquirer*), we'll need to learn how to parse political activity on the Net.

That said, a lightly regulated, open market of ideas and activity will find its power over time. The tools and services being developed will start to build this market and help it grow. We choose the metaphor of a market deliberately: Unlike the winner-take-all reality of electoral politics, multiple competing ideas and voices can flourish in a market; there is room for individual choice and lines between choices can remain blurry.

But as any politician will tell you, running the country, state or town requires distinct policy goals and compromise – a function that software for political participation will have to integrate over time. ■ **R 1.0**

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Resources

Web Lab Clinton impeachment hearings archive: http://www.reality-check.org

US Department of Commerce study: "Falling Through the Net," http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fttn00/contents00.html

MoveOn Action Forum: http://www.actionforum.com/forum/index.html?forum_id=264

Study from The Pew Research Center: http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=200

Verified Voting volunteer site: http://vevo.verifiedvoting.org/techwatch/

Calendar of High-Tech Events

SEPTEMBER 2-7 **Ars Electronica** - Linz, Austria. For 25 years, Ars Electronica has been analyzing the social and cultural effects of digital media and communications technologies from critical as well as utopian, artistic and scientific perspectives. For more information, visit the website. www.aec.at/en/festival **E**

SEPTEMBER 8-10 **Demo Mobile** - La Jolla, CA. See the products, take in the speeches and hear the interviews from the people and companies that are driving the mobile marketplace. Register online or call IDG at 1 (800) 643-4668 or 1 (508) 490-6545; fax, 1 (508) 460-1385; registrar@idgexecforums.com. www.demo.com

SEPTEMBER 13-16 **Speechtek** - New York, NY. Learn everything there is to know about voice solutions. . .from experts in the field. For more information contact Chris Nolan, 1 (877) 993-9767 (outside the US, 1 (859) 278-2223); fax, 1 (859) 278-7364; e-mail, chris@amcommexpos.com. www.speechtek.com

OCTOBER 4-6 **Vortex 2004: Setting the IT Agenda** - Santa Barbara, CA. Sponsored by IDG, this invitation-only event is a summit on the future of IT. Come share your views on where the nearly $1 trillion should be spent on the enterprise IT market. Request an invitation online or contact Network World, 1 (800) 643-4668; fax, 1 (508) 460-1385; e-mail, registrar@vortex.net. www.idgexecforums.com/vortex2/

OCTOBER 5-7 **Web 2.0** - San Francisco, CA. Chaired by John Battele this newest O'Reilly conference will explore how the Web has developed into a robust platform for innovation across many media and devices. Speakers include a constellation of former PC Forum speakers, including Mark Benioff, Lisa Gansky, Mitch Kapor and John Doerr. Register online or call 1 (800) 998-9938; fax, 1 (707) 829-1342; or contact Linda Holder, lholder@oreilly.com. www.web2con.com

OCTOBER 12-15 **TedMed** - Charleston, SC. Joined this year by *The Wall Street Journal*, Richard Saul Wurman leads TEDMED attendees as they explore the business and communication of medical technology, research and healthcare in the 21st century. Register online or contact Wurman at wurmanrs@aol.com; 1 (401) 848-2299. www.tedmed.com **E**

OCTOBER 18-23 **Fall 2004 Voice on the Net** - Boston, MA. Despite the name of the conference, this is about more than just voice over IP; it's about a veritable IP communications revolution. Speakers include FCC Chairman Michael Powell and Senator John Sununu. For more information call (631) 547-0800 or e-mail von2003@pulver.com. www.von.com

OCTOBER 21-24 **Pop!Tech** - Camden, ME. Pop!Tech is a one-of-a-kind intellectual and creative conference that explores the social impact of technology and the shape of things to come. This year's title is "The New Renaissance." For more information, call 1 (207) 230-2425; fax, 1 (207) 236-7797; e-mail; info@poptech.org. www.poptech.org

E Events Esther plans to attend.

Lack of a symbol is no indication of lack of merit. The full, current calendar is available on our website, www.release1-0.com. Please contact Christina Koukkos (christina@edventure.com) to let us know about other events we should include.

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