

# E-campaigning Will Lead to a Stronger Democracy

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National and international systems of governance are failing to fulfil their promises. The system, described as “representative democracy”, is intended to achieve rule by the people; the citizenry should direct government and hold it to account for its decisions. Unfortunately national governments increasingly flout their responsibilities, whilst international bodies from the UN to the WTO fail to offer the public representation at all. To exacerbate matters, citizens have become dangerously accepting of government policy. One indicator of this is declining turnout at elections – in the UK voter turnout between 1955 and 1992 was stable at 75%, but this fell to 58% in 2001<sup>1</sup>. As a result, many decisions are made in the interests of the powerful, rather than the people. In 2001 just 11% of the British public supported privatisation of public services<sup>2</sup>, but the government carried them through anyway; it now has its sights on the NHS. The war in Iraq is another case where interests of powerful forces in both the US and UK seemed to dominate over public opinion. Meanwhile in the International arena the WTO, IMF and World Bank force countries with delicate economies to open their markets, and the people most affected are powerless to stop them.

One of the most compelling reasons for citizens’ incapacity to hold governments to account is that individuals find it difficult to know how to respond to these failings. Structured channels of feedback to the government are not immediately accessible, and they do not help form communities of understanding. Campaigns are in part a response to this failing. They help inform, connect, involve and mobilise individuals<sup>3</sup>. They form a deliberative channel of communication between the people and the government, and in doing so fill a void in the democratic structure. As campaigners, it is important that we understand and respect this role and our concomitant duty to run campaigns accessibly and democratically.

In order recognise how campaigns can help achieve these goals, it is important to understand the relationship between the campaign itself and its participants. How campaigns reach and influence people depends on how this target audience interacts and engages with those campaigns. The research project *Participate*<sup>4</sup> is an excellent resource for understanding the different modes of participation. The research project shows that different types of interaction indicate different levels of commitment and roles as a participator. The practices of *listening* and *watching* are at the bottom of a hierarchy of involvement, followed by *giving money*, *providing information*, “*being there*”, *giving time* and *starting something new*. The actions at the bottom of the hierarchy tend to be mass ones, involving large numbers of people – these are the *happy bystanders*. As you move up the structure you find increasingly more committed people who are willing to deal with more niche issues: starting with the *reluctants*, and moving through *followers*, *evangelists* and *instigators*. Key motivators for participants are a sense of belonging to a community and the idea of the cause, followed by (in no particular order) passion, altruism, reward and specific good. Important barriers meanwhile are apathy, cynicism and triviality – the sense that a contribution is too trivial to be a

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<sup>1</sup> International IDEA Database, [http://www.idea.int/vt/country\\_view.cfm?CountryCode=GB](http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm?CountryCode=GB)

<sup>2</sup> Private sector plan 'more unpopular than poll tax', Patrick Wintour, 12/07/ 2001, The Guardian

<sup>3</sup> *Web Campaigning*, Kirsten A. Foot and Steven M. Schneider, 2006

<sup>4</sup> *Mass Participation Review*, Participate Online, 2006, <http://massparticipationreview.notlong.com>

valuable contribution. A successful campaign will capture large numbers of people at the bottom of the hierarchy of involvement, and use the motivators to push people up the ladder.

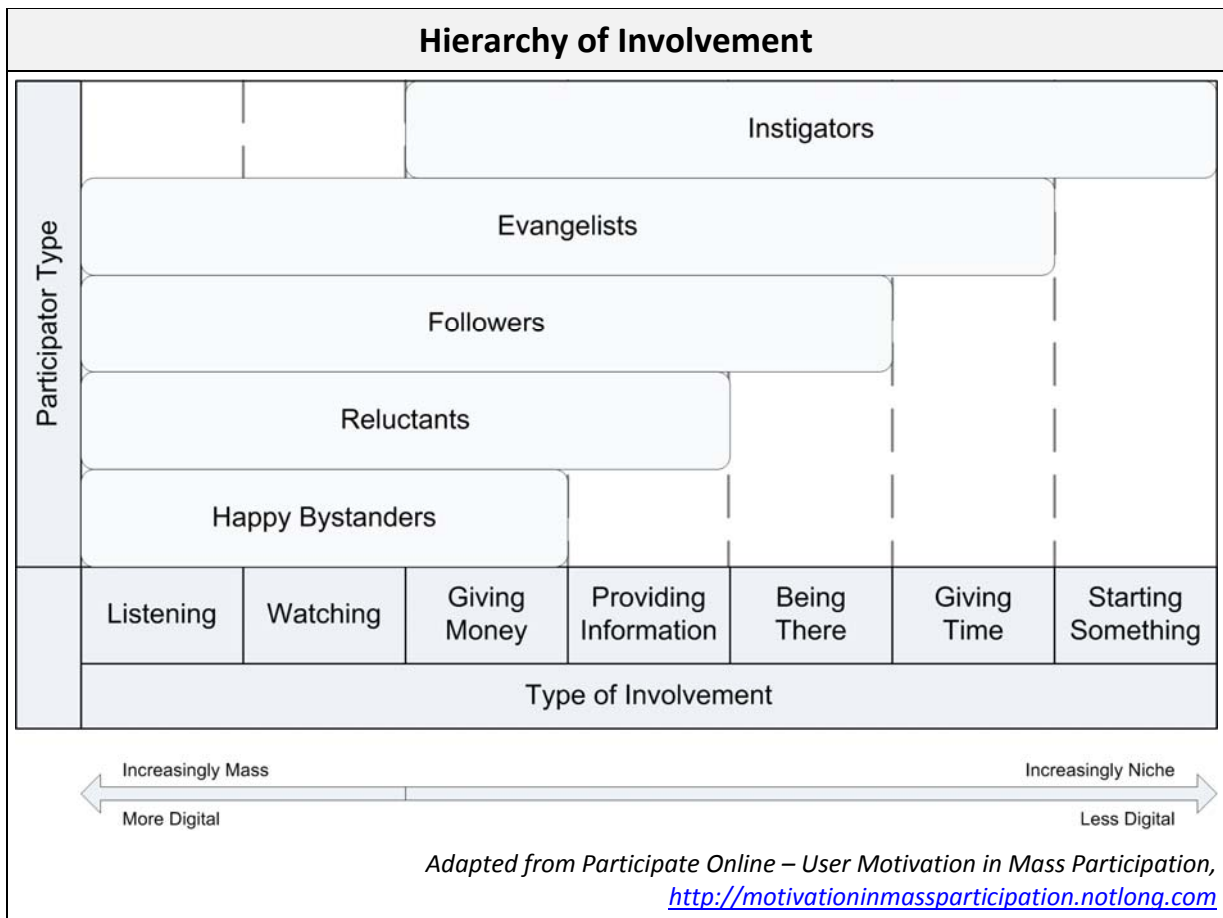
Understanding this participation model can help you ensure that your members contribute to the best of their ability. In order to allow campaigns to fill the democratic void in deliberative communication with government however, they need to find ways to increase the levels of participation by the happy bystanders, reluctants and followers. This has always been a difficulty for campaigners, but I believe the current wave of social innovation in the Internet is opening up exciting, dynamic and innovative solutions to the problem. The Internet creates the potential to open up a dialogue with a massive audience across economic and geographic borders. Never before has it been possible to speak freely to so many different people, whilst avoiding the constraints placed by funding bodies and censorship. Now modern “Web 2.0” sites are making it possible to build communities around this global conversation. Ricken Patel of the international online campaigning group Avaaz.org describes this as “the public square moving online”. The potential impact of this is massive, and the responses by economic powerhouses to global movements such as to the global environmental movement are indicative of this. Global public opinion, in Avaaz’s words, is “becoming the new superpower”.

So what is the evidence for all this potential? The Internet is replete with examples of organisations which have exploited modern communications to instigate and accelerate successful campaigns. The most exciting aspect of this is not that there is a large collection of resources to learn from, but that every day people are finding new applications of the technology. One of the pioneer campaigning websites, MoveOn.org, was founded after an email demanding American politics move on from the Clinton-Lewinsky affair was sent to 100 people, and reached 100,000 people within a week. Greenpeace’s greenmyapple.org incorporated unedited articles and imagery contributed by users in its successful campaign to get Apple to reduce the environmental impact of their products. The lightamillioncandles.com website was stunned to reach its target of lighting 1,000,000 online candles for the victims of child pornography in just 60 days. Avaaz.org is another impressive innovator, creating new convergence opportunities between online and offline spaces. Their recent live webcast of a talk by the new Foreign Minister David Milliband allowed them to open direct communications between their international membership and a member of the British Cabinet.

The greatest Internet opportunities however are still unknown. The World Wide Web is currently going through a minor revolution, with a battle going on over how best to build trusted, authoritative, accurate and dependable resources. The notion of crowdsourcing – the idea that contributions from a large community of committed people can produce better solutions than trained individuals – has had an incredible impact. The collaboratively built Wikipedia has not only proved that the concept cannot be ignored, it has also shifted the entire culture of the web: people are no longer browsers, but contributors. Nowhere has this new wave of user contributed content been more pronounced than in the Social Networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook – which is attempting to shift the platform for the web from individuals and companies to networks.

The challenge now is to exploit these new “Web 2.0” practices to achieve an equivalent *browser-to-contributor-shift* in our democratic practices. If we can do this, we can move from a representative democracy to a participative democracy. Now wouldn’t that be something?

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### Web Campaigning Practices

Most campaigning websites make use of four different types of practices, which build on top of each other.

**Informing**  
The presenting of information to users about a campaign.

**Connecting**  
The practice of linking to other sites in order to direct the reader to related resources, and also help define the site itself – “You are what you link”.

**Involving**  
Encouraging interaction between the site and its readers. This can take many forms from online discussions to user contributed videos.

**Mobilising**  
Persuading visitors to take up and campaign on an issue themselves.

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graph TD
    A[Mobilising] --- B[Involving]
    A --- C[Connecting]
    B --- D[Informing]
    C --- D
  
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Diagram adapted from Web Campaigning, see <http://mitpress.mit.edu/webcampaigning>

## Publishing Tools

### Blogs

Blogs provide a simple system for adding “posts” to a website, generally ordered by date, which members of the public can then comment on. They have been a revolutionary addition to the internet, not only in providing a new form to websites, but also in the accessibility of the tools used to manage them. Blogs normally provide a basic layout, you can then tweak this yourself if you know HTML. Alternatively you can choose between *themes* released by the web community, which quickly and easily allow you to change the feel of a website. Wordpress is one of the most powerful and user friendly options around, and allows the installation of *plugins* to further enhance the functionality of your website.

*Use a blog to chart the development of a campaign, or log a summer trip*

- <http://www.wordpress.com> & <http://themes.wordpress.com>
- <http://www.blogspot.com>

### Wikis

The wiki blew onto the public scene with the enormously successful Wikipedia. The basic premise of a wiki is a system that allows anybody to edit or create pages on a website. A simplified markup language (easier than HTML) is used to add basic formatting functionality. Many wikis now support user management, so you can restrict who can edit different pages.

*Use a wiki for team organisation, recording knowledge, or maintaining a simple website*

- <http://pbwiki.com>
- <http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?WikiFarms>

### Forums

Forums allow discussions to be managed in threads. One person poses a question, and others post responses. There are distinct similarities to blogs, although blogs tend to put more emphasis on the original post than the comments.

*Use a forum to discuss ideas openly, or as an alternative to email lists*

- <http://www.simplerachines.org>

### Content Management Systems (CMS)

CMSs are more complex web applications, which aim to allow you to build more sophisticated websites, without requiring an understanding of web languages.

*Use a CMS if you are eager to investigate the nuts and bolts of web development, and require much more than a blog from your website.*

- <http://www.drupal.com>
- <http://www.phpnuke.org>

See *Work Together 60+ Collaborative tools for groups*, <http://mashable.com/2007/07/22/online-collaboration/>

## Crucial Components of a Campaigning Email

### Crisitunity

Crisis & Opportunity - why does the reader need to know this *now*?

### Tipping Point

Demonstrate actionability by explaining that this is a "tipping point" situation, where the end user's action could make all the difference.

### Winnability

Give a convincing and credible argument for why you are going to win this campaign

### Movement Story

Make people feel a part of something, even (especially) those who don't participate a lot.

## More tips for successful emails

### Make it easy

People decide whether or not to read an email in a matter of seconds, so it is important to make it engaging and easy to read. Also, make sure initial participation easy; once people have taken up an action once, they are much more likely to do so again.

### Write for the medium

Remember that people don't *read* online, they *scan* – construct your email to reflect this, for example, making key points in bold.

### Build attention

Use and make the most of media spikes.

### Persuade people to pass emails on

People are much more likely to read an email if it was received from a friend, someone they trust, rather than an organisation.

### People engage issue by issue.

Hook them to your larger cause through an individual campaign.

## Further Reading

Web Campaigning, Kirsten A. Foot and Steven M. Schneider, 2006, <http://mitpress.mit.edu/webcampaigning>  
Participate Online, [www.participateonline.co.uk](http://www.participateonline.co.uk)

Mass Participation Review, Participate Online, <http://massparticipationreview.notlong.com>

User Motivation in Mass Participation, Participate Online, <http://motivationinmassparticipation.notlong.com>

Post Party Politics, Involve.org, <http://postpartypolitics.notlong.com>

Contentious Citizens – Civil Societies role in campaigning for social change, Young Foundation, <http://www.youngfoundation.org.uk/node/475>

Work Together: 60+ Collaborative tools for groups, <http://mashable.com/2007/07/22/online-collaboration/>

An Introduction to Activism on the Internet, <http://www.backspace.com/action/all.php>

## Campaigning Websites

Participatory Campaigning

<http://www.avaaz.org>

<http://www.moveon.org>

<http://www.care2.com/>

<http://www.getup.org.au/>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork>

#### Ecampainging Advice

<http://www.fairsay.com>

<http://www.backspace.com/action/>

<http://del.icio.us/tag/ecampainging>

#### Example campaigns

<http://www.lightamillioncandles.com>

<http://www.thebigask.com>

<http://www.greenmyapple.org>

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/stoptorture/torturetest/>

#### Blogging for change

<http://www.treehugger.com>

<http://www.worldchanging.com/>

<http://engagemedia.org/>

#### Campainging Tools

<http://www.mobileactive.org/>

<http://www.mysociety.org>