

**STEPPING UP FOR DEMOCRACY:  
USING NEW COMMUNICATION MEDIA TO REVITALIZE  
CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIVISM**

A Thesis

by

JODI MICHELE MINION

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

August 2008

Major Subject: Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Tarla R. Peterson
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## ABSTRACT

Stepping up for Democracy: Using New Communication Media to Revitalize Citizen Participation in Climate Change Activism. (August 2008)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Tarla Rai Peterson

Contemporary activists in the United States find it increasingly difficult to negotiate socio-political constraints to build a social movement. Those looking for relatively safe and effective venues for participation in and communication of dissent face oppression by the hegemonic power of the political right and, in the case of climate activism, anti-climate-science discourse. I use the case study of the climate action movement to explore how contemporary activists use new communication media technologies (hereafter new media) to establish and strengthen a movement. Even though climate change affects the daily lives of ordinary Americans, no U.S. policy exists to mitigate carbon emissions. New media offer the potential for new, safer venues for participation in and communication about social movements. I used empirical qualitative and critical methods to analyze the communication of climate change activism in Texas, USA.

I examined how Step It Up! 2007 (SIU) used new media to facilitate or constrain public participation in climate action. I used critical discourse analysis to examine information provided to citizens on the SIU website, and I attended the SIU event in San

Antonio, Texas. I found SIU organizers successfully used new media to increase agitation and to shift power away from the federal government to the local grassroots level. I recommend activists use new media as a unifying tool, to provide a fragmented and apathetic citizenry with a message that can be used to affect change.

I conducted a critical rhetorical analysis of Working Film's 2007 documentary on global warming, *Everything's Cool*, as a means to suggest how, and in what ways, activists use new media to build a movement. I also hosted an activist screening. I examined how new media facilitate or constrain communication of movement messages. I found activists used the documentary and open source activism as a rhetorical exercise in agitation to refigure public understanding of climate science and attitudes toward U.S. climate change policy. *Everything's Cool* positioned climate activism, and participating in the movement broadly, as accessible and acceptable, helping to rhetorically constitute a new kind of citizen activist, shifting power roles to a grassroots network of local leaders.

**DEDICATION**

*For Lenna*

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I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues and the WFSC department faculty and staff for making my time at Texas A&M University a rewarding experience. Finally, thanks to my family for their support and patience.

**NOMENCLATURE**

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CRA	Critical Rhetorical Analysis
IRB	Institutional Review Board
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
PO	Participant Observation
SIU	Step It Up! 2007
9-11	September 11, 2001 Terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: WARMING UP

In recent years contemporary activists in the United States find it increasingly difficult to negotiate socio-political constraints to build a social movement. Those looking for safe and effective venues for participation in and communication of dissent face oppression by the hegemonic power of the political right.<sup>1</sup> Activists no longer safely protest the establishment in the physical sphere.<sup>2</sup> Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City (9-11), public display of political dissent loses legitimacy in the public sphere; the ideologies of those who protest the establishment appear to contradict popular appeals to patriotism and Homeland Security.<sup>3</sup> During times of war when freedom of speech is censored, contemporary activists struggle to find safe and legitimate venues for dissent.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, in the case of global warming, activists struggle to rally a largely apathetic citizenry to gain saliency and resonance needed to build a movement.

Climate change activists also struggle to gain legitimacy due to anti-climate-science discourse conveyed by the fossil fuel industry, the Bush Administration, and the mainstream media. Drawing from the basic tenet of natural science—that science is always uncertain—politicians and lobbyists pose global warming as theory rather than

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This thesis follows the style of *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*.

fact, confusing the general public about the level and quality of scientific agreement regarding the existence of global warming (e.g., balanced journalism portrays the two sides of the ‘argument’—global warming proponents and global warming opponents—as having similarly sized memberships), its likely causes (e.g., the extent to which humans contribute towards it), and potential public policies that could slow its rate (e.g., whether or not regulation is needed at national or international levels). Even though climate change affects the day-to-day lives of ordinary Americans, to date, no U.S. policy exists to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Global warming activists struggle to find legitimate and safe venues to communicate global warming messages that contribute to movement building. When venues for traditional protest no longer exist, some activists turn toward the Internet and other new media technologies to find safe, effective venues to communicate.

In this thesis, I used the emergent U.S. climate action movement as a case study to explore how contemporary activists use new media technologies to help establish and build a movement. The climate action movement provides an illustrative case study, with web-based environmental non profits such as Step It Up! 2007 (SIU) and EverythingsCool.org relying on new media technologies to help build public awareness and participation in climate action. I define new media as *interactive media that are produced and distributed using computer technologies and whose data are available for random access*.<sup>5</sup> Examples of new media include the Internet, websites, video games, and DVDs. New media disseminate large amounts of information in short, succinct packages, increasing information distribution speed and availability. They influence

what is communicated about environmental issues and to whom. In the case of global warming, the public receives information on climate change through new media such as television (e.g., *The Simpsons*), DVDs (e.g., Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*), and the Internet (e.g., [stepiup2007.org](http://stepiup2007.org)). In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, new media brought waves of images of the impacts of global warming—lost homes and business, broken levees, and receding shorelines—into our living rooms and offices.

Negotiating political and citizen apathy, climate change activists combine new media technologies with on the ground activism. Working to gain saliency and increase momentum for a climate action movement, web-based activists ask ordinary citizens to organize climate action events (e.g., rallies, house parties, and documentary screenings) in their hometowns or at America's iconic places. Web-based organizers use the concept of open source activism to provide local organizers with online materials, instructions, and networking opportunities needed to organize an event, broadening opportunities for regular citizens to engage in climate change activism. This expands prospects of public participation in climate change policy and thus, democracy, but forgoes extreme acts in order to accommodate the insidious power of the status quo. Activists also use new media—specifically, the documentary film via DVD—as a rhetorical exercise in agitation. In this case, new media act as a mechanism to stir viewers into action.<sup>6</sup> It is clear new media change how citizens communicate about and participate in political processes. What is not clear is how new media affects democracy or how they influence social movement messaging.

In this thesis, I examined climate change activist organizations that used new media and open source activism as a way to build a movement. Specifically, I examined how SIU used new media technologies to facilitate or constrain public participation in climate action, and how *Everything's Cool* activists used the DVD and open source activism to communicate messages in ways that lead to movement building. I used critical analysis to explore the relationships between power, democracy, and social movement building. In this chapter, I begin by addressing the background and justification for the research. Next, I explore important literature pertaining to new media, democracy, and social movements. Finally, I review critical and empirical methods used in this thesis.

## **Background and Justification**

### **New Media and Social Movements**

The U.S. Department of Defense first developed the Internet as a command and control network in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> In the early 1990s, the public gained access to the web. Up until this point, the web conveniently facilitated a social system for its select user group. By the mid 1990s, the public used the Internet to "reestablish... a sense of community and belonging to a mass society."<sup>8</sup> The Internet increased information availability and dissemination, allowing for a more informed citizenry.<sup>9</sup> Problems associated with the Internet involve the anonymity of the web and barriers to participation. Various scholars have recognized access to participation as a democratic issue, often labeling it a "digital divide."<sup>10</sup> The Internet also has provided a forum for dissent that is vital for democratic processes.<sup>11</sup> It offers one example of the

communication model advocated by John Durham Peters.<sup>12</sup> Peters argues that the sophisticated political dialogue of the elite limits participatory opportunities for ordinary citizens. Rather, he advocates radical dissemination as a more egalitarian approach that enables profligate, disruptive, and sometimes revolutionary, political interaction.<sup>13</sup>

New media provide an example of this approach as they reach new audiences and enable the invention of new forms of participation such as virtual marches and e-petitions. Web-based activism gains saliency as groups such as SIU and EverythingsCool.org collaborate to form a climate action network that links a disenfranchised, fragmented citizenry. Using the idea of open source activism, activists now communicate and network using the Internet in ways that lead to on the ground actions. In this thesis I define open source activism as *the use of new media technologies to enable people who would not otherwise engage in concerted activism, to act toward a common ideology or cause.*<sup>14</sup> Activists also use politically charged documentaries that, through carefully thought out rhetorical strategies, act as a mechanism to stir viewers into action to build a social movement.

New media encourage development of new social movements by providing means for cultural and symbolic forms of resistance communication to work with or replace traditional political forms.<sup>15</sup> Julie Schutten defines new social movements as *collectives whose rhetorics constitute ideologies, values, and identities that are either opposed to or provide an alternative to the status quo.*<sup>16</sup> Schutten explains that beyond attending public gatherings or events individuals can also participate in new social movements through consumer based activities and by identifying with and assigning

meaning to movement symbols and ideas. The ability to network between activist organizations and to communicate movement messages, symbols, and meaning is especially important for climate activists attempting to build a social movement because how members identify with an issue is critical to the success of the movement. New media affect who communicates about environmental issues and how they do so. New media open new pathways for participation and increase the efficiency of activist networks and protest tactics.

### **Climate Action Movement**

The climate change movement grew over the course of twenty years as Bill McKibben, environmental studies scholar and author of books such as *The End of Nature*, *Deep Economy*, and *Fight Global Warming Now*, and other environmental authors and journalists worked to educate the world about the threat of global warming. In the early twenty-first century, the Youth Climate Movement formed to encourage high schools and college campuses to become carbon neutral. Prior to 2005, global warming got little to no media attention; Hurricane Katrina, a level five hurricane that made landfall on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2005 as a level three hurricane and that devastated New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama was the driver that persuaded mainstream media in the United States to cover the climate change issue.

During the summer of 2006, Bill McKibben and students from Middlebury College organized a 5-day walk across Vermont as a way to call for climate action. The purpose of the walk was to gain media awareness for human induced climate change and to call out local leaders to urge them to commit to supporting national carbon emission



reduction policy. Even though the event attracted approximately one thousand walkers, it gained little media attention. In January 2007, McKibben and six Middlebury College students responded to this limited media coverage by launching [stepitup2007.org](http://stepitup2007.org). Step It Up asked ordinary people across the nation to organize climate action rallies in their hometowns and at America's iconic places. On April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007, all rallies carried the same message, "Step It Up, Congress! Cut Carbon 80% by 2050". Step It Up headquarter organizers were available to local organizers via phone and email and they developed their website based on organizer needs. On the Nationwide Day of Climate Action, over fourteen hundred events occurred and group photos of individual events were sent to Congress. A second Nationwide Day of Climate Action occurred on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007. This second day of action asked citizens to organize rallies in places that honor national leaders. The November action ended with over six hundred events; SIU asked the question: *Who's a Leader?* And they found the answer: *You Are!*<sup>17</sup>

Filmmakers Daniel B. Gold and Judith Helfand (Working Films) followed the Youth Climate Movement, the 5-day walk across Vermont, and the beginning weeks of SIU to produce the film *Everything's Cool*. The toxic comedy/documentary debuted in 2007 at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah. Working Films produced two versions of the film: one for general audiences and one subtitled "Activist Version". In fall of 2007 the producers of *Everything's Cool* joined with SIU to ask those who participated in the April 14, 2007 event to host a film screening. *Everything's Cool* producers offered local activists a copy (DVD) of the Activist Version for \$10, a way to connect with members of the public by advertising their event on [EverythingsCool.org](http://EverythingsCool.org),

and printable pre-made *Everything's Cool* screening flyers. *Everything's Cool* starred major climate change actors such as journalist Ross Gelbspan, writer-activist Bill McKibben, and the Weather Channel's, Dr. Heidi Cullen. The point of the film was to expose strategic use of anti-climate-science rhetorics communicated by the political right and persuade ordinary citizens to rise up to affect change.<sup>18</sup>

The climate action movement provides an excellent case study to examine how contemporary activists use new media technologies via open source activism to agitate for change. It offers the ability to examine how new media influences public participation opportunities. It also provides an opportunity to analyze how new media facilitate or constrain the communication of messages that contribute to a new social movement. Further, *Everything Cool's* activists' use of the documentary film and open-source activism offer an excellent opportunity to explore new media as a rhetorical mechanism for social change. Finally, the climate change movement provides a great opportunity to examine relationships between new media, new social movement building, and contemporary activism.

### **Objectives**

I examined SIU and *Everything's Cool* (the use of the DVD via open source activism) to gain a better understanding of the relationships between new media technologies and social movement building in the United States. This thesis addresses the broad research questions: 1) How do new media facilitate and/or constrain aspects of public participation in climate change activism? 2) How do new media facilitate and/or constrain the communication of symbols, ideas, and messages that contribute to a social

movement? To address these questions, I focus on the relationships between: 1) new media and democracy and 2) new media and social movements. Given that most all communication on environmental issues now includes the use of new media, the objectives of this research are to:

1. Examine how the Internet acts as a mechanism for public participation and how it facilitates and constrains elements of participation that lead to the development of a social movement.
2. Discuss how the Internet encourages or discourages democratic practice.
3. Examine how the use of open source activism via a documentary film facilitates and constrains communication of global warming messages that contribute to a new social movement.
4. Discuss how new media encourage or discourage social movement building.

## **Literature Review**

### **New Media and Democracy**

To examine public participation in the U.S. climate change movement, I first review its respective democratic context. Following World War II, the United States emerged as a world power with both a powerful military and assertive foreign policy. Further, the George W. Bush Administration tightened its grip on democracy following 9-11 by declaring a "war on terror and initiating a fear-based rhetoric."<sup>19</sup> This rhetoric places those that oppose the government outside the political process through we–they (e.g., friend–enemy) discriminations. This sharp distinction attacks the moral standing,

rather than the politics, of any dissenting view, thus delegitimizing both specific opposition and the concept of opposition in general.<sup>20</sup>

However, democracy requires a venue for dissent in order to thrive.<sup>21</sup> Chantal Mouffe calls for a “clashing of sides” to ensure a healthy democracy.<sup>22</sup> This clash is agonistic, rather than antagonist, in that it occurs between opponents rather than adversaries. Mouffe explains, “While antagonism is a we–they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we–they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to the conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents.”<sup>23</sup> Active democracies involve negotiation of differences rather than eradication of them.<sup>24</sup> Further, democracy requires an inclusive participatory process where information is shared through inclusive, collaborative processes.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, vigorous participation by an active and informed citizenry is necessary to ensure a sustainable democracy.<sup>26</sup>

New media provide new, safer mechanisms for the public to participate in decision making processes. For example, the Internet provides dissenters with safety via 1) anonymity and 2) cyber-opportunities. Cyber-opportunities include direct access to ‘how-to’ and ‘expert’ information and the ability to share ideas and tactics between like-minded people with (or without) spatial barriers.<sup>27</sup> Although many optimistic claims about how the Internet contributes towards participation within a public sphere exist, scholars do not know how they actually play out.<sup>28</sup> Along with the Internet, other forms of new media such as DVDs and television provide opportunities to participate in political processes through imagery and art.<sup>29</sup> Several studies have examined how new

media affect public participation in governmental or traditional participatory processes; traditional and web-based news coverage affects public participation; and how the Internet facilitates postmodern communication aspects of the public sphere.<sup>30</sup>

One study in particular helps illuminate how environmental movements use new media to facilitate visibility and saliency for their issues. Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples address ways new media facilitate aspects of environmental activism and movements.<sup>31</sup> They use the violence of the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle as a case study to illustrate how extreme acts heighten awareness, drawing media attention and thus, saliency for globalization issues. DeLuca and Peeples introduce the concept of the public screen as a complement to the public sphere. The public screen takes into account modern technologies, such as television and the Internet, which inform communication and action regarding the social and the political. These new media increase the speed and hypermediacy of information made available to the public. They provide this information via complex and dynamic communication pathways that lie outside the constraints of traditional participation processes. This thesis builds on DeLuca and Peeples's study by investigating how new media affect public participation in environmental movements on the ground.

Current research on new media, communication, and public participation does not address how new media facilitate or constrain different aspects of public participation when combined with on the ground action (e.g., who participates, how, and why); nor does it address how technology mediated participation affects current democratic practices. This research project attempts to fill these gaps by examining how

a web-based environmental activist group uses the Internet to organize and mediate virtual and material actions to agitate for change. I examine who participated and how, and I discuss how Internet mediated participation encourages or discourages different aspects of democracy. Given the popularity and use of new media, this timely research helps political and communication scholars better understand contemporary activism.

### **New Media and Social Movements**

There are two dominant communication theories pertaining to social movements. Traditional social movement theory is grounded in Marxist resource mobilization theory, whereas “new” social movement theory focuses on cultural concerns such as identity and meaning. Though I rely on new social movement theory I review both traditional and new social movement theories, highlighting roles of new media in both, to offer an explanation of how the use of new media differs across theories.

Building on the works of traditional movement scholars, Charles Stewart, Craig Smith, and Robert Denton explain that contemporary social movements are characterized by their: 1) organization (identities of the leaders and followers are apparent); 2) position outside of the establishment; 3) large scope; 4) opposition to societal norms and values; 5) opposition to moral based struggle; and 6) pervasive, persuasive actions.<sup>32</sup> Stewart, Smith, and Denton focus on we–they discriminatory rhetorics that directly address how an oppressed citizenry negotiates power roles in relation to a dominant political elite. Further, movements involve performances that play out in the public realm. They explain, “Social movements are intricate social dramas involving multiple scenes, acts, agents, agencies, and purposes. They include: heroes and

heroines, fools and geniuses, victims and villains, evil and good, success and failures, hope and disillusionment."<sup>33</sup>

According to Stewart, Smith, and Denton, contemporary activists use new media technologies to affect change. Further, they argue that social movements occur in and exist to, confront the realm of the political. Activists intending to build a social movement go through a series of steps of movement building; these steps signify different stages of agitation that collectives may navigate to affect decisions controlled by the political establishment. They explain that the first stage of social movement building is *genesis*. In this stage, ideas fester but little action occurs. The second phase is *social unrest*. Here, the public becomes informed on the issues via the Internet and mainstream media and agitation begins as like-minded individuals share information and tactics. The third stage of social movement building is *enthusiastic mobilization*. It is in this stage where movement members become motivated; this is where leaders surface and where action begins. Once major action occurs, the movement moves into the *maintenance* stage. Here, media move on to other pertinent issues and it is the responsibility of movement participants to follow through with any outcomes (e.g., litigation, change of policy, etc.). The final stage of movement building is *termination*. Here, the movement either succeeds or fails, but the ideas and symbols created within the movement remain. Social movements act outside the established social order and hierarchy. The normative social order is dynamic, power-oriented, and hierarchical, and is always in a state of flux. Further, the strength and power of movements are measured through their ability to create doubts about the legitimacy of the establishment.<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, new social movement theory highlights cultural contexts. According to DeLuca and Steven Buechler, in contemporary social movements, political action is less focused on resource mobilization and more focused on identity, meaning, renaming, and other aspects of everyday life.<sup>35</sup> Buechler argues new social movements avoid co-optation by the conventional political system by rejecting current capitalist values such as materialism. Further, new social movements are no longer characterized by organized groups with strategic and persistent campaigns that play out in the political realm. Rather, activism now entails agitation and tactics that appeal to individuals and that contain messages and meanings that resonate at infinite scales. Put another way, new social movements focus less on strategies and more on tactics; they are episodic to appeal to and address a fragmented and apathetic citizenry.

New media provide opportunities for activists to build movements by offering venues for activists to communicate movement messages (e.g., activists can cater to specific values, alter existing or familiar messages by affixing new or enriched meanings, align viewer identities with movement ideals). Further, they allow activists to rename or redefine movement issues and power roles.<sup>36</sup> For example, activists reach citizens through the tactical use of image events.<sup>37</sup> New media also contribute to blurred lines between social and political lines,<sup>38</sup> making participation in new social movements a part of our everyday lives. New media do this by making what was once considered private lives, public.

In this thesis, I use the case study of *Everything's Cool* to examine the relationships between new media and activist based communication in ways that



contribute to movement building. Previous research completed on relationships between new media and social movement communication examined how activist discourses change in light of new media, the politicization of the Internet as an activist tool and how media co-opt social movements, and how media effects change message exposure.<sup>39</sup> Julie Schutten's 2006 essay, "Invoking *Practical Magic*: New Social Movements, Hidden Populations, and the Public Screen" examines the relationships between media and new social movements with hidden populations. Schutten uses the neo-pagan movement to illustrate how media facilitate identity constructions in cases with covert members. Schutten suggests scholars researching media and social movements with hidden populations examine what activists do with media provided by the culture industry rather than what the culture industry does to the movement.

Previous research that addresses relationships between new media, social movement, and movement communications has not explicitly addressed how activists use new media and open source activism to facilitate or constrain symbols, meanings, and ideas that build a new social movement. This thesis works to fill this gap by examining new media and open source activism as rhetorical exercises in agitation and as a significant communication venue for movement building.

## **Methods of Analysis**

### **Empirical Qualitative Analysis**

Over 30 SIU events occurred in Texas celebrating the Nationwide Day of Climate Action. During the course of this research I used empirical qualitative methods to experience the culture of the participants and of the Internet-mediated activism that

was represented at different climate action movement events. Empirical qualitative methods allowed me to explore how climate action events are experienced and by whom when they move from virtual to material realms. Denzin and Lincoln explain,

...qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.<sup>40</sup>

Qualitative researchers use a wide range of expertise, methods, and means of interpretation to build a descriptive case study, piece by piece; the findings of the study are location, time, and culture specific.<sup>41</sup> Qualitative research provides a rich description of a specific phenomenon to better understand it at a micro level and to supplement similar, macro studies.

### *Participant Observation*

I attended and participated in the April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007, Step It Up, San Antonio! event. I chose the San Antonio event for its location and for the politicians scheduled to speak. By becoming a participant observer, I allowed myself to interact with and experience the climate action culture that was represented at the event;<sup>42</sup> as a human instrument, face-to-face interaction allowed me to explore the meanings of what I was witnessing from the perspective of a rally participant. Throughout the event, I recorded my observations in the form of field notes. Following the event, I transcribed my experience following Clifford Geertz's<sup>43</sup> ethnographic method—thick description.

Geertz uses Gilbert Ryle's idea of the wink<sup>44</sup> to illustrate how a rich, thick ethnography captures both context and culture. The wink is interpreted differently depending on knowledge of its cultural context. Thick description is a rich, detailed description of an experience that considers the context of a phenomenon and the intentions of the organizers, and it tracks the development of the action.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, the thin description is merely facts—data analyzed at a keyhole view, with little regard for context. Essentially, the thick description provides an entwined tale of events—historical, current, and observational. The tale is then rooted in social and political contexts, time and space, and location and view.

In addition to my own field work, I collaborated with nine other SIU research teams from across the nation. Each team attended at least one SIU event. In this thesis, I worked from field notes and thick descriptions from the Texas SIU events in Austin, Plano, and San Antonio, the Raleigh, North Carolina event, and the Bloomington, Indiana event. Each site was chosen for its location and event descriptions.

To experience the culture of open source activism, I hosted and participated in an *Everything's Cool* activist screening. Approximately 35 people attended the event, and following the film viewing, a climate science expert led a roundtable discussion on science and advocacy. The discussion was digitally recorded and transcribed. The tapes were then destroyed.

### *Unstructured Interviews*

In the weeks leading up to the April 14, 2007 event, I did an unstructured interview with the local organizer in charge of the Austin and San Antonio events. Other

organizers for events in Houston and Plano declined to be interviewed. During the interviews, we discussed the organizer's experience with SIU, the website, being part of a social movement, and their familiarity and concerns with climate change and the climate action movement. On the day of the action, I engaged SIU San Antonio! participants in informal conversations. The informal interview protocol coincided with questions that were asked by all researchers on the nationwide research team (see Appendix A), and I digitally recorded all interviews, conversations, and speeches. Following the event, I transcribed the recordings, coding all identities to ensure confidentiality, and then erased the tapes. Completed transcriptions will reside in a locked cabinet in 214 Heep Laboratory Building at Texas A&M University in College Station, TX for three years. After three years I will destroy the documents. This research is cleared through Texas A&M's Institutional Review Board (IRB), protocol number 2007-0203.

I also conducted unstructured telephone interviews and/or conference calls with all six of SIU headquarter student organizers between March 2007 and May 2008. These interviews served as a means to obtain background information on SIU and the climate action movement and to provide feedback on the research along the way. The interview protocol for these interviews was emergent, reflecting the position of the activist in relation to the movement and the climate change culture and politics at the given time (see Appendix B). Essentially, I kept an ongoing dialogue with SIU headquarters before and after the events to see how their experiences with new media and the climate change movement changed over time. The interviews were either digitally recorded or I worked

from field notes. All records of the interviews were transcribed, coded, and aggregated. I followed standard interview protocol to ensure confidentiality according to the IRB as described above.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

I used critical methods to explore the relationships between new media and public participation and to examine implications of new media for democracy. Critical methods provide researchers the opportunity to examine relationships within a phenomenon while maintaining a clear awareness of both their role in society and the sociopolitical and cultural contexts.<sup>46</sup> I used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine SIU's webpage texts, interview transcripts, and participant observation descriptions. Differing from traditional discourse approaches that analyze text structure, CDA allows researchers to explain discourse in terms of the way discourse structures "enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society."<sup>47</sup> Further, Teun A. van Dijk explains, "With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality."<sup>48</sup> Therefore, CDA allowed me to provide recommendations to activists based on the implications of my findings.

I archived all web pages and working links, event descriptions (text only), and the organizer's forum from January 1, 2007 to May 14, 2007 from [stepitup2007.org](http://stepitup2007.org) (now [april.stepitup2007.org](http://april.stepitup2007.org)). I chose these dates for their relevance to the start of SIU and extending to cover one full month following the April 14, 2007 event. I called the group of texts provided by SIU on their website to help ordinary citizens to organize an

event a ‘cookbook’ for rally organizing. I examined the cookbook using CDA which facilitated exploration of relationships between the Internet and public participation, and suggested implications of new media on democracy.<sup>49</sup> I then explored the relationship between other dimensions of SIU and the cookbook, including images available on the site. Finally, I discussed the implications of new media on public participation and democracy.

### **Critical Rhetorical Analysis**

I also explored the relationship between new media and social movements by looking at how activists use new media to communicate movement messages to start a movement. Further, I examined how activists use new media as a rhetorical exercise in agitation. I integrated a critical rhetorical analysis (CRA) of the documentary *Everything’s Cool* with participant observation of the on-the-ground aspect of open source activism. I chose the film for its relevance to the climate change movement case study and for its use of open source activism. The CRA of the film facilitated the exploration of relationships between new media and open source activism, and suggested implications on new social movement building.<sup>50</sup> I focused on how activists communicated messages by using symbols and renaming and by affixing new meanings and identities to familiar objects and ordinary citizens, respectively, and how that translated into movement building in everyday life. Finally, I discussed the implications of my findings on social movement building and provided recommendations for scholars and activists.

## CHAPTER II

### NEW MEDIA, NEW MOVEMENT?

Environmental activism in the United States is not what it used to be. A decade or more ago, participating in a protest meant we marched on Washington, picketed, initiated consumer boycotts, joined in a tree-sit or other forms of civil disobedience, or even, perhaps, engaged in the occasional act of ecotage. We formed tight knit groups and planned actions using local resources; we gained new members through word-of-mouth and mass mailings. Movements took hold when charismatic leaders brought grassroots concerns to the national spotlight.<sup>51</sup> These types of activism still happen but the opportunities to participate in environmental decision making processes have changed. We now have new forms of media that have developed into public forums: email supplements snail mail and chat rooms and blogs replace face to face meetings; we download theme music instead of spin it. Activists use new media to communicate about important issues, to gain group and movement membership, and to organize virtual and on-the-ground actions. In short, new media change how we communicate about and do activism; they change how people participate as citizens in a democracy.

So, what exactly are new media? I define them as *interactive media that are produced and distributed using computer technologies and whose data are available for random access*.<sup>52</sup> Examples of new media include the Internet, websites, and DVDs. Unlike print text or imagery, people can experience any part of new media at any time in almost limitless quantities as long as they have the technology. For instance, a lone

picture of two fingers held high above a crowd in the shape of a 'V' shown in a print magazine is supplemented with thousands of digital photos available for searching and downloading, in any order and at any time. New media influence activism by changing how movement symbols and ideas are communicated and to whom.

Throughout this chapter, I maintain a broad definition of public participation that encompasses both traditional and nontraditional approaches to social movements: citizen input into decision making processes. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City (9-11), public participation in the United States and other nominal democracies has been compromised by an increased emphasis on national security. This emphasis threatens democracy's vitality by removing legitimate venues for dissent. As Robert L. Ivie and Chantal Mouffe have argued, democracy requires vigorous participation by an active and informed citizenry to thrive.<sup>53</sup> When dissent is no longer allowed, both participation opportunities and message content become suspect.

New media suggest ways activists may adapt to contemporary political constraints by inventing new forms of participation such as virtual marches and petitions. These forms of participation may reach audiences that are insulated from traditional protests, whether by conscious choice or by the more insidious power of any status quo. New media saturate the everyday lives of U.S. citizens, thus encouraging development of new social movements that focus on participant values, ideologies, and identities.<sup>54</sup> Further, Internet activism gains saliency as web-based groups such as MoveOn.org and StopGlobalWarming.org penetrate the mainstream. These groups



combine online tools with more traditional on-the-ground activism. For example, MoveOn.org made headline news after placing a controversial anti-war advertisement in a major newspaper. StopGlobalWarming.org organized a college campus tour featuring Sheryl Crow to stir up climate action. Both organizations have large web-based memberships and regularly submit e-letters and e-petitions to Congress. It is clear new media have changed how people communicate about and participate in political processes. What is less clear is how they affect (1) who participates, (2) how these individuals participate, and (3) the practice of democracy in general.

In this chapter I use SIU to interrogate what it means to participate in web-based activism, and how global warming activists have used new media to build a movement. I look at how the Internet facilitated and constrained different aspects of public participation for the SIU movement building effort, and suggest what future environmental activists might learn from SIU organizers' efforts. In *Finding a Democratic Space*, I use the work of Chantal Mouffe to demonstrate the importance of legitimate venues for dissent when freedom of speech is compromised. In *Public Participation in U.S. Environmental Policy*, I briefly review traditional and nontraditional forms of participation in U.S. environmental decision making processes. I then highlight where basic tenets of democracy emerge in a new media setting. In *How Step It Up Organizers Capitalized (or Not) on New Media* I explore how SIU used new media in different ways to help start a movement. I conclude the chapter with *What New Media May Offer Environmental Organizers* by suggesting SIU used new media to: (1) cast a wide net and increase opportunities for ordinary citizens to participate in the

political process; (2) offer new venues for dissent allowing those with low risk tolerances access to participation in building a social movement; (3) shift power away from the federal government to the local grassroots level. Finally, in *Lessons Learned*, I offer suggestions for how both scholars and activists can make the most of new media technologies while researching or doing environmental activism in the post 9-11 context.

### **Finding a Democratic Space for Dissent**

The most commonly used model for analyzing public participation in democratic regimes is derived from the work of Jurgen Habermas, and emphasizes rationality, sincerity, shared interests, and a mutual effort to reach consensus through public deliberation.<sup>55</sup> The practical problem with this perspective is that it does not grapple with power and influence, and minimizes the importance of difference. Idealizing democratic politics as rational, clean, efficient, and reliable can have unforeseen negative consequences.<sup>56</sup> Apathy, cynicism and despair grow when citizens discover that the political process is messy, highly interest-based, and rhetorical. Acting under the guise of rationality, elites downplay the rhetoric in their own actions while strategically curtailing citizen rule. This is seen in the case of global warming when the George W. Bush Administration effectively curbs development of carbon emission policy by defining climate scientists and global warming activists as alarmist, extremist, and agenda driven, as opposed to the supposedly moderate position of the administration.

Mouffe offers an alternative model of democracy, arguing that dissent is far more important than rationality, sincerity and consensus.<sup>57</sup> To gain legitimacy, the public forum must encourage divergent voices in the decision making process. Mouffe calls her

space for legitimized dissent, agonistic pluralism: agonism implies legitimacy of oppositional messages exchanged between dissenting parties, and pluralism implies multiple voices allowed into the decision making process. M. Nils Peterson, Stacey A. Allison, Markus J. Peterson, et al. explain, “meaningful engagement in argumentation requires participants to fully explain their own perspectives to those with opposing views, as well as to actively listen to opposing viewpoints with the goal of understanding those perspectives. Participants need not like each other, but they must respect each other as adversaries worth arguing against.”<sup>58</sup> The point is to negotiate among differences rather than erase them. Not only is dissent important to prevent democracy from imploding, but it also may facilitate development of new ideas and unveil alternatives to current policies and perspectives.

Strong democracies involve active contestation in the context of difference and division.<sup>59</sup> Ivie explains current regimes weaken democracy by relegating difference to a space of “undecideability” and presenting conflict negatively.<sup>60</sup> He argues for replacement of the current culture of conformity with a culture of dissent. Finding appropriate forums for dissent is increasingly difficult in the “us” versus “them,” “friend” or “enemy” discourses, promulgated in the United States.<sup>61</sup> This sharp distinction between friends and enemies attacks the moral standing, rather than merely the politics, of dissenters, thus delegitimizing both specific opponents and the concept of opposition in general.<sup>62</sup> Dissenters are unpatriotic and dangerous.<sup>63</sup> An example of this is seen in the Eugene, Oregon, trials of six environmental activists accused of arson

between 1999 and 2001, participants in direct action now stand trial as terrorists, under an expanded definition that includes vandalism.<sup>64</sup>

Tarla Rai Peterson, M. Nils Peterson, Markus J. Peterson, et al. add that it is not enough to provide an open space for dissent but rather, democracy requires an inclusive participatory process where information is shared and the citizenry is informed through collaboration and learning.<sup>65</sup> Access via an inclusive process and an informed citizenry are key tenets for effective public participation that provides legitimacy between differing views.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, Peterson et al. argue that participation in a democracy is not, and should not be, comfortable. As environmental activists use new media it is important to ask whether reliance on the relative safety provided by the anonymity of the Internet and forgoing on-the-ground action may compromise the democratic struggle. On the other hand, careful application of new media may complement embodied democratic participation, thus revitalizing democracy.

### **Public Participation in U.S. Environmental Policy**

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) institutionalized public participation by mandating public information and involvement activities such as environmental impact statements, public meetings, and citizen comment procedures. A potential problem with NEPA is that its approach is consultative (via governmental employees and interest groups) rather than collaborative, providing an advisory rather than policy-making role for the public.<sup>67</sup> In cases where these traditional forms of public participation do not exist (e.g., the lack of U.S. climate change policy) activists protest within the legal system (e.g., suing the federal government for violating NEPA) or they

protest outside of the establishment, calling for social or political change. Traditional forms of protest include letter writing, boycotts, and face-to-face encounters such as demonstrations (e.g., the ‘cracking’ of Glen Canyon Dam), rallies (e.g., Earth Day), and marches (e.g., Great Peace March). New media have the potential to facilitate broader, more inclusive forms of participation by increasing the number and types of participation opportunities (e.g., blogs, forums, electronic petitions, public comments), distributing those opportunities across space and time, increasing overall access to information, providing new systems for managing information, and linking individuals and groups (e.g., via email lists, social networking, and website links).

Several scholars claim the Internet allows anonymous and thus, unconstrained political dialogues, enabling inclusion of those unwilling to dissent in the physical realm.<sup>68</sup> I think it makes more sense to argue that the Internet provides different venues for dissent, including some that are less risky than embodied protest. For example, blogs allow citizens to put forth ideas in an editorial-like form without real-time response and without having to divulge personally identifying information. Non-profits like SIU and MoveOn.org mix virtual activism with on-the-ground action, by asking ordinary citizens to organize local rallies. These organizers discuss and brainstorm ideas for events within designated organizer forums on the Internet. These forums provide one-on-one conversation opportunities where participants reveal information to one another about themselves and their locations. Step It Up and MoveOn.org also act as facilitators for organizers to meet event participants online and eventually, face to face on the day of the action.

When providing low risk opportunities for dissent, activists must consider the quality of the messages sent. John Durham Peters argues that one reason political expression matters is that participation with the body is required for an effective citizenry.<sup>69</sup> In cases where democracy and civil liberties are threatened, ordinary citizens that protest in the physical sphere place their bodies at risk. Peters and Phaedra C. Pezzullo suggest the risk of witnessing with the body provides resonance needed to gain saliency for political issues.<sup>70</sup> Dissenting with the body is also thought to increase legitimacy for ideas and actions, a central tenet of participation under Mouffe's agonistic pluralism. As cyber-activism expands, the question of whether a social movement requires physical or material movement, as well as virtual movement, becomes very real.

### **How Step It Up Organizers Capitalized (or Not) on New Media**

In January 2007, Bill McKibben and six Middlebury College students responded to the minimal media coverage of their 5-day walk across Vermont for climate action by launching a web-based campaign at [stepitup2007.org](http://stepitup2007.org). Step It Up asked ordinary people across the nation to organize climate action rallies in their hometowns and at America's iconic places. On April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007, all rallies carried the same message, "Step It Up, Congress! Cut Carbon 80% by 2050." Organizers from SIU headquarters explained in an interview that they were available to local organizers via phone and email and they developed their website based on organizer needs.

[Stepitup2007.org](http://Stepitup2007.org) provided local organizers with ways to post information about their event and for participants to contact local organizers. When SIU headquarters staff became aware that many local organizers were concerned citizens who had never even

attended a rally, let alone organized one, they provided all the components needed to organize a rally.<sup>71</sup>

I call what SIU provided to local organizers a ‘cookbook’ for how to do a rally; local organizers only needed to add flavor and, if needed, a permit to gather. The SIU website provided information on how to contact elected officials and how to best communicate with the media; it also provided downloadable fact sheets, press releases, and posters. The website provided banner making 101, action ideas, and means for local individuals or groups to collaborate with local and national organizations. I consider all of these resources as part of the rally cookbook. The website also provided basic information on SIU and the headquarters team, a blog, a place to download and listen to movement music, and links to climate change and SIU media coverage. For this chapter, I analyzed how the cookbook of Internet mediated information provided to local organizers and participants directly influenced who participated in SIU and how they did so.

I archived all texts, including working pages and links and pictures provided on [stepitup2007.org](http://stepitup2007.org) from January 4, 2007 (the start of SIU) to May 14, 2007 (one month after the April 14<sup>th</sup> events). I examined the texts using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which facilitated exploration of relationships between the Internet and public participation, and suggested implications of new media on democracy.<sup>72</sup> I then explored the relationship between other dimensions of SIU and the cookbook, including images available on the site. To get a sense of how the National Day of Climate Action moved from Internet mediated communication to on-the-ground action I participated in a SIU

event in San Antonio, Texas, and I used research team member participant observation and interview data from the Raleigh, North Carolina, and Bloomington, Indiana, events.

In addition to CDA, observing the events as a participant allowed me to interact with and experience the climate action culture that was represented at the events. Further, experiencing SIU in person allowed me to see how the rallies were experienced when the events moved from the virtual to material realm. I worked from field notes and thick descriptions of the events.<sup>73</sup> This enabled me to root the story in social and political contexts, time and space, and location and view. Consistent with the goals suggested by CDA, I organized researcher observations according to themes related to participation, power roles, and movement struggles. Since observations made at the different events are used to inform findings drawn from my examination of SIU texts, I do not attempt to generalize SIU by location, event type, or participant experience.

#### Analysis of the Step It Up Cookbook

The SIU cookbook revealed basic tenets for what it meant to effectively participate as a SIU local organizer. McKibben and the SIU team asked local organizers to:

- Hold an event on April 14, 2007 in your hometown or at an American iconic place
- Get as many people to attend as is appropriate for the action type (e.g., scores of folks for a rally, a handful for a barbeque)
- Be creative with who is invited to attend and the action type
- Contact the press



- Use a banner that carries the SIU message
- Report back (with a group photo)

Step It Up encouraged people to use and pull from established interest groups; if no group existed, SIU provided individuals with networking tools to either form a new group or connect with others at local or national levels. The cookbook offered concerned citizens, all acting in different ways to affect climate change, a unified message, and the push to move climate policy from action at the individual level (i.e., changing light bulbs) to the halls of Congress.

Throughout the SIU cookbook texts, SIU maintained an inclusive stance on who participated and how; they considered potential socio-economic barriers and encouraged participation that allowed those with little knowledge of global warming or those with few resources access to membership in the movement. Step It Up also provided basic information on the relevant political situation along with links to information resources, thus encouraging development of a more informed citizenry. Further, SIU empowered individuals and local groups, possibly encouraging a power shift away from a centralized elite to a local, grassroots level. In what follows, we explore each of these ideas in detail to illustrate how SIU used the Internet to help start a movement.

### **Access**

Stepitup2007.org encouraged everyone to participate. To facilitate this process, the website encouraged local organizers to involve those they know are interested in climate action, and to cast a wider net by inviting everyone on their email lists and even people they do not know. The webpage titled, *Involve More People*, encouraged readers

to, "...invite all your friends (and) involve people whom you don't know: Communities who live close to dirty energy sources, who are dealing with pollution in their daily lives. Global warming affects us all, even those people whom you don't think will be interested...find out what matters."<sup>74</sup> Barriers to participation due to limited resources were considered as well. The webpage titled, Banner making 101, explained how to make a banner for those who did not know. The instructions are clear and do not require that organizers purchase materials.<sup>75</sup> Rather, SIU encouraged people to use recycled materials and to be creative.

The SIU cookbook provided the basics for those who have never organized, or even attended, a protest event. An interview with that the local organizer for SIU, San Antonio! revealed she had never attended a rally before let alone organized one. Following the suggestion to select an iconic location, local organizers held SIU, San Antonio! in Alamo Square amidst numerous shoppers and tourists on a blustery Saturday afternoon. All aspects of the SIU cookbook were seen at the rally: the banner, flyers, stickers, prepared speeches, the media, and over 100 concerned citizens. Participants at that event comprised an array of local grassroots organizations including the Alamo chapter of the Sierra Club, Texas Democrats, and local activists attempting to thwart plans to fast track NEPA. Participants ranged from toddlers to 90-somethings. Most were non-Hispanic whites, despite a thriving Hispanic culture that characterizes South Central Texas. Organizers pulled from local resources as rally goers watched belly dancers perform in the unseasonable cold wind and later played environmental trivial pursuit. Connection with the movement was clear as participants chanted the unified

message: “What do we want?” “80%!” “When do we want it by?” “2050!” A group photo was taken in front of the Alamo and became one of the scrolling images seen on the SIU website homepage (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Photo of SIU! San Antonio event. Used with permission from SIU 2007.

Participating as a local organizer is framed on the website as easy and not time consuming; in fact, a national SIU organizer explained in an interview that the SIU team absorbed a lot of the time required to organize an event by working around the clock to support local efforts. For those needing to ask questions via telephone, SIU team members were available. For those who preferred to use tools offered online, the information provided was “as simple as 1-2-3.” This idea is illustrated in the interview with the local organizer for SIU, Bloomington! who recalls her interactions with the SIU team as prompt and “non-generic.” She later added the SIU team are “real people and they’re working their butts off to do this stuff, just like everybody else.” Step It Up also provided detailed instructions for how to effectively work with the media: “When you call reporters, always ask if they have a minute to talk. Often they will be on deadline

and will not be able to talk to you then. If they are busy, ask when a better time would be to call them. The reporter will appreciate this greatly and be more receptive.”<sup>76</sup> This information reduces potential challenges involved with organizing. Further, it provides new organizers with a short lesson in media etiquette which helps the movement look professional and may indirectly increase media coverage.

The point of access to SIU was the use of the banner carrying the message of 80% cuts in carbon emissions by 2050 to Congress. The banner was the unifying symbol needed to start a movement. Not only did its message convey expectations to elected officials, it united thousands of fragmented citizens for a couple of hours on one day. Classical movement scholars stress the importance of unifying symbols that have meanings of which all movement members are aware.<sup>77</sup> Without a symbol, there is no movement. In the case of SIU, the Internet facilitated the process of connecting a highly disconnected citizenry by providing the symbol that was then used to demonstrate the material presence of the movement in (hopefully) iconic locations throughout the nation.

Step It Up increased access for rally participants holding different experiences and values for risk. When considering participating in direct action, some may fear being arrested or being seen with extremists. Some citizens hold professional and social positions that do not allow them to safely participate in actions that protest the establishment. The speakers at SIU, San Antonio! placed participants at ease with light hearted, non-threatening messages. At the Raleigh event, five of the event speakers were between the ages of 8 and 12 years old. On the reverse side, some prefer direct action. For motivated individuals with high risk tolerance, SIU suggested participating via

extreme sports (that retain a pro-American cast) such as deep-sea diving (see figure 2) or mountain climbing. Step It Up set the stage for Mouffe's agonistic pluralism by maintaining a respectful, non threatening dialogue when dissenting from the establishment while calling for bold and immediate action to affect change. They offered opportunities for face-to-face dissent while providing dissenters cyber venues for sharing ideas and tactics for dissenting in the physical realm.



Figure 2: Photo of SIU event off the coast of Key West. Used with permission from SIU 2007.

### **Informed Citizenry**

Step It Up provided information to educate website visitors on the more general climate issue and specifically on movement building. The home page included a brief introduction from Bill McKibben, “Friends, this is an invitation to help start a movement.”<sup>78</sup> The page also included pictures of events whose photos were taken in advance, links to climate movement music and various collaborators and sponsors, and a blog. The website provided information on how people can act at the individual level.

Information provided on the website carried through to the actual events. For example, at SIU, San Antonio! rally organizers planted the answers to the trivia questions in the audience so the crowd seemed informed and knowledgeable about the topic:

Speaker: Now, what [do we do] about water protection projects?

Crowd: Rain water capture! Low-flow!

Speaker: Low flow toilets...did anybody say that? Somebody was supposed to say low-flow toilets. Thank you. Oh, ok. Now, what do we do to decrease energy consumption in our home?

At the SIU Global Climate Change rally in Raleigh, North Carolina, a speaker linked the local event with information found on faith-based climate change websites,

I think it's fine to believe that climate stewardship reflects God's orders for us to be stewards of the planet but probably not if you drove an SUV to church. You know, there needs to be some kind of consistency in what we believe and our behavior as a result of that.

The blog provided the bulk of the information made available to the citizenry. Blog postings were written by the SIU team and nationally known climate action figures, such as Winona LaDuke and Laurie David. The blog followed local policy issues and kept movement members informed of the progress of SIU events. Certain actions were highlighted; those with extreme events (e.g., aerial photos taken in Park City, Utah, deep sea diving off Key West) gained the spotlight but so did a quaint gathering in Ohio. The blog also offered links to scientific reports, media coverage, YouTube videos, and other

groups working on climate action. For those interested in climate action, the blog was rich with potential for gaining information on the issue and then provided links and tools for those interested in creating change.

The webpage titled, “About” provided information about the climate action movement, the SIU team, and a letter from Bill McKibben.<sup>79</sup> The SIU team members were framed as friendly, everyday folks seeking to join with others to affect change at the national level. One SIU team member discussed his dream to bake bread and work in grassroots activism but stated that he was taking time off from his dream to affect national policy. Website visitors could also choose to view answers to Frequently Asked Questions such as, “Why not just have a march on Washington?” or “Will this thing work/will Congress be listening?”<sup>80</sup> The SIU answers reduce barriers to participation by those unsure of Internet mediated activism. The website also provided information on how to agitate for change. John W. Bowers, Donovan J. Ochs, and Richard J. Jensen<sup>81</sup> suggest movements form when a group of suppressed citizens become fed up with social or political conditions. Agitation then increases to the point of action at scales that go beyond individual households. A SIU rally speaker in San Antonio informed the public that participating in the national action is a critical step in being an informed citizen:

Individually, you may think, ‘Oh, I can’t do anything much’...you can do something. ‘I can’t do a whole lot.’ You can do something. We can ask our Congress to step up to the plate. It’s not too much to ask that we breathe clean air. Is it?!

Bill McKibben provides another example in his letter to website visitors:

Those of us who know that climate change is the greatest threat civilization now faces have science on our side; we have economists and policy specialists, courageous mayors and governors, engineers with cool new technology. But we don't have a movement—the largest rally yet held in the U.S. about global warming drew a thousand people. If we're going to make the kind of change we need in the short time left us, we need something that looks like the civil rights movement, and we need it now. Changing light bulbs just isn't enough.... this action needs all kinds of people to help out. We can't make it happen—it has to assemble itself. . . The recent elections have given us an opening, and polling shows most Americans know there's a problem. But the forces of inertia and business-as-usual are still in control, and only our voices, united and loud, joyful and determined, can change that reality.<sup>82</sup>

In the case of SIU, it is not enough to simply know how to mitigate an individual carbon footprint but rather, an informed citizen holds greater responsibility that involves acting within the public realm in some directed, deliberate way.

### **Shift to Local Power**

Movement building involves changing power relations between an oppressed citizenry and the powerful elite. As noted earlier, public participation in direct action faces renewed barriers in the post 9-11 political milieu. Further, political leaders and the fossil fuel industry have maintained power by discrediting climate science, labeling those who support it as radical or misinformed. The SIU cookbook attempted to rework the current power structure by reminding website visitors of their responsibility to act as



citizens and by creating a new group of local climate change leaders. They also offered internationally renowned scientists and scientific panels—and the actions of other developed nations—to justify the need for action.

Step It Up framed climate action movement members against their opponents in a David and Goliath like manner:

The other side in this battle has essentially unlimited resources: Exxon Mobil, for instance, made more money than any company in history last year, and according to a recent report they spent a nice chunk of it spreading disinformation about climate change. But we can beat them if enough of us mobilize—our sheer numbers can outweigh their special influence.<sup>83</sup>

This example carries a sense of Gandhi-like mobilization by an oppressed (but free to assemble), citizenry. Oppression in this case is manifested in the notion that the Bush Administration has compromised scientific integrity in its fervor to avoid appropriate action. The SIU website suggested a potential shift in power when citizens demand that their government listen to them instead of to the fossil fuel industry. This power shift is illustrated at the Raleigh event as a child speaker explained,

It's like when my mom tells me to go up and clean my room and I just shove everything under the bed. Usually, I feel guilty enough that I at least have intent to do a better job. But I think I have an idea why this is different. Ignorance, people are just shoving this issue under the bed. After all, if I can't see it, it can't see me, right? That seems to be Bush's theory. But, are we the only ones who see a flaw in their lobby?

Step It Up, San Antonio! focused on local issues and interests as they played out in the national and global arena. Organizers and speakers positioned local activists as holding the power to do something about global warming. They encouraged individual action along with networking to affect national change as is illustrated in a SIU, San Antonio! speech:

if we're not careful, we're going to build multi-level parking garages into eternity when you and I know we could do something better if we just would power up to the plate and make sure that we produce the kind of a thinking eclectic....If an army marches on its stomach, a democracy marches on its education and information and I submit to you that's the glory of this moment here, in front of the Alamo, where we talk about what we can do, what we should do, what we must do. Let's step it up and make it happen!

Step It Up also provided opportunities to explore hidden power in new media. The organizers used tools and networking opportunities provided online to work against the establishment, while identifying themselves with a single nationwide day of action. For example, a SIU team member noted, "If I could manage to separate the mouse from my hand, I'd be raising my fist in solidarity with all of you."<sup>84</sup> The extent to which new media allow activists new ways to communicate the diffusion and extent of movement membership is seen on the SIU website:

As people gather, we'll link pictures of the protests together electronically via the web—before the weekend is out, we'll have the largest protest the country has

ever seen, not in numbers but in extent. From every corner of the nation we'll start to shake things up.<sup>85</sup>

In this example, SIU linked distinctive characteristics of new media, such as their fast message delivery and broad distribution capabilities, with the filmic technique of combining multiple images to create a new visual experience. In film, collage can recreate important narrative moments, achieve visual contrasts, or even attempt to portray the experience of memory.<sup>86</sup> For SIU, the rhetorical possibilities of new media bought these filmic techniques together in new ways. For example, the scrolling action of the images (see figure 3) enabled by new media technology builds a sense of anticipation in the viewer, and suggested a national presence (we see many cities and states from across the nation represented), thus appealing to decision makers.



Figure 3: Scrolling photos from SIU action reports. Used with permission from SIU 2007.

Step It Up also used new media to encourage networking between activist groups, as exemplified by a brief appearance of the “Raging Grannies” at the Raleigh

rally. The Raging Grannies comprise a loosely-organized network that originated in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1987 and now includes members throughout Canada, the United States, Australia, Greece and the United Kingdom.<sup>87</sup> At the Raleigh event, the Raging Grannies of Orange County (a local “granny gaggle”) appeared dressed in pale green Lady Liberty costumes to sing a series of patriotic songs reworked with global warming lyrics (see figure 4). Exactly as suggested in the “granny starter kit” on the international website, the members began by using a pitchpipe to get the members in tune. At the climactic conclusion of their final song, the grannies all raised the lamps they had been holding in their right hands; as the lamps lit simultaneously, they were revealed to the audience as compact fluorescents. Linking a standard organizing template from the web with their ironic renditions of traditional, patriotic songs, the grannies paired a sense of shared community with a timely and practical suggestion for combating global warming (compact fluorescent lamps were a recurring theme throughout local events across the country). They did so within the framework of the larger organizing template provided to the local rally organizers via [stepitup2007.org](http://stepitup2007.org). Step It Up provided the information, resources, and networking capabilities to reach well beyond a single day of action and form an actual movement. Indeed, the movement continues to progress as a second day of action occurred on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007; following that event, the SIU team helped to kick start the web-based network, [1Sky.org](http://1Sky.org), and they now work together on a global project, [350.org](http://350.org).



Figure 4: Raging Grannies at the Raleigh SIU action. Photo taken by William J. Kinsella

My analysis indicated SIU used new media to provide ordinary citizens information and components needed to organize an event. The cookbook provided those unfamiliar with or unsure about participating in building a climate action movement new venues and networking opportunities to reduce barriers to participation. Other aspects of the website complemented the cookbook by providing additional information and networking resources needed to develop an informed citizenry and to further extend a unique assemblage of local actions into a national movement. The events in Raleigh, North Carolina, and San Antonio, Texas, illustrate the interaction between cookbook suggestions such as providing networking opportunities, carrying the unifying message, and development of an informed citizenry and local sensibilities such as appeals to regional issues.

### **What New Media May Offer Environmental Organizers**

Step It Up used new media technologies to provide opportunities for ordinary citizens to participate in climate action. These opportunities enabled those concerned

with the risk of participating in the physical realm, marginalized groups, and those who do not consider themselves as activists, to join with other concerned citizens to affect climate change. For example, the local organizer for SIU, Bloomington! felt that the April 14, 2007 event (or at least her participation in it) would not have happened without the use of the Internet. In the case of SIU, new media provided venues for legitimized dissent; venues that catered to a relatively mainstream, pro-establishment means of opposition; venues for activists seeking to work with the establishment, rather than against it. This could hinder anti-establishment discourses that are needed to build agitation to levels that allow messages to resonate in ways that penetrate decision making processes. On the other hand, the participation of the Raging Grannies at the Raleigh event indicates that anti-establishment groups can work together effectively with more mainstream citizens to promote change.

One product of the events is a steady stream of photos to Congress (material) and to website visitors (virtual); this stream symbolizes the extent of the action, providing resonance at a national level. Step It Up used the Internet to mediate a shift of power away from the federal government to the local grassroots level. Participation in SIU meant networking and collaborating at scales never seen before; stay at home moms connected with Greenpeace and local chapters of the Sierra Club united to create change at the community level. The attempt to shift power from the federal government to local residents is at the very heart of what lies behind all social movements: an oppressed citizenry rising up to challenge the establishment. Web-based social movements may offer the citizenry new tools to complement and/or replace traditional agitation

techniques. New media tools hold the potential to help organizers negotiate the post 9-11 political scene by offering venues for dissent and information dissemination that allow messages to reach the halls of congress while reducing the risk of being arrested and charged with terrorism.

### **Lessons Learned**

My analysis indicates SIU organizers successfully used new media to increase agitation and to shift power away from the federal government to the local grassroots level. This shift in power holds promise for environmental activists. Increased local power could lead to the invigoration of local economies, and more accountability for environmental actions and ecosystem sustainability. New media also hold potential for fostering hidden power, allowing marginalized groups and oppressed citizens to gain voice in the decision making process. This has implications on how we go about achieving environmental justice and managing environmental conflict. Marginalized groups may gain power and momentum through national, web-based campaigns; further, collaborative environmental conflict management practices may include stakeholders who are not 'local' but who are easily accessible online.

Activists seeking to develop social movements that challenge mainstream suppression of scientific information about the environment can use new media as a unifying tool, to provide a simultaneously frustrated and apathetic citizenry with a message that can be used to affect change. The relative success of SIU suggests that organizers can use new media to help negotiate the fragmented political landscape in the following ways: 1) *Cast a wide net*—the Internet provides opportunities to use search

engines to meet like-minded folks, to network and collaborate via mass emails, to reach out to affected communities, and to get early media coverage; 2) *Provide a safety net* for those who are unsure by keeping the tone of the action light and by mediating communication between organizers and event participants, for both pre and post event communications; 3) *Provide simple and clear instructions* on how-to do the type of event you propose (if possible, provide instructions in multiple languages); 4) *Establish media relationships* and encourage local activists to do the same. Provide pre-made press releases and informational fliers that may be (but do not have to be) creatively adapted to local conditions, to reduce barriers to participation due to time shortages; 5) *Empower leaders at the local level*—encourage grassroots and city-to-city networking and the development of local leaders.



### CHAPTER III

#### ***EVERYTHING'S COOL: NEW MEDIA AND OPEN SOURCE ACTIVISM AS A RHETORICAL EXERCISE IN AGITATION***

In 2005, filmmakers Judith Helfand and Daniel Gold set out across the United States in a large van painted with images of droughts, fires, and flooding to discover what U.S. citizens thought about the threat of global warming. They spent the next three months identifying and exploring the gulf between what scientists think about the issue of global warming and what the public understands about it. In 2007, the Working Films (Helfand and Gold) documentary *Everything's Cool* debuted at Sundance Film Festival in Salt Lake City, Utah. *Everything's Cool* reflects the struggles and ideologies of the climate change movement from its infancy in the 1980s to late 2006. Although most scientists agree global warming poses a serious threat to current and future human society, no U.S. policy exists to mitigate for human induced carbon emissions, which contribute directly to global warming.<sup>88</sup> Politicians, especially in the United States, claim because climate science is uncertain, policies must wait for further research.<sup>89</sup> Further, in the aftermath of the bombing on the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001 (9-11), those who protest the establishment are delegitimized in the name of Homeland Security.<sup>90</sup> *Everything's Cool* depicts those working to build a climate action movement as negotiating both political hostility and citizen apathy while needing to redefine what it means to participate in an environmental movement. And the film itself becomes part of that negotiation.

New social movements like the one depicted in *Everything's Cool* build momentum and membership through symbols, meanings, and identities.<sup>91</sup> Julie Schutten<sup>92</sup> defines new social movements as *collectives whose rhetorics constitute ideologies, values, and identities that are either opposed to or provide an alternative to the status quo*. These movements use new communication media technologies (hereafter new media) as part of their struggle to find legitimate venues to build movement momentum. I define new media as *interactive media that are produced and distributed using computer technologies and whose data are available for random access*.<sup>93</sup> Examples of new media include the Internet, Web pages, and DVDs. Activists such as those affiliated with *Everything's Cool* use new media to organize widespread events with localized, grassroots support. Using the concept of open source activism,<sup>94</sup> web-based organizers provide networking and event development tools to ordinary citizens who organize local protest events that are affiliated with a nationwide call to action. In the case of *Everything's Cool*, Working Films distributed a slightly abbreviated 'Activist Version' of the feature film via DVD and asked ordinary citizens to host a screening. I define open source activism as *the use of new media technologies to enable people who would not otherwise engage in concerted activism, to act toward a common ideology or cause*.<sup>95</sup> Since it expands how activism is done and by whom, open source activism is especially important in cases where movement symbols and ideas are delegitimized in the political and public spheres. As Western society becomes increasingly dependent on computer-based technologies, understanding their role becomes increasingly central to activists' ability to facilitate communication of movement messages, particularly in

situations where the movement is actively opposed by powerful political and corporate interests, as is the case of climate change action.

In this chapter, I use the case of *Everything's Cool* to suggest how contemporary activists use documentary film via open source activism as one form of new media technology, to build a social movement. I examine how open source activism enables movement advocates to capitalize on new media to facilitate communication of symbols, ideals, and messages that contribute to this social movement. In what follows I briefly discuss the U.S. climate change policy issue, examining both anti-science rhetorics and the post 9-11 political context, I use the work of Steven Buechler and Kevin DeLuca to illuminate the importance of messages and identities to new social movements.<sup>96</sup> I then briefly review new media theory, highlighting the documentary film genre and how it is used in open source activism. Next, I use *Everything's Cool* to illuminate the potential of open source activism as a rhetorical exercise in agitation to communicate movement messages. I conclude the chapter by arguing that *Everything's Cool* activists used open source activism as a rhetorical exercise in agitation to refigure public understanding of climate science and attitudes toward U.S. climate change policy. They strategically integrated movement messages into viewings of the documentary to make participation in the climate action movement both more accessible and acceptable than it had previously been. Finally, I offer suggestions for how scholars and activists can use open source activism to make the most of new media when building a contemporary social movement.

## Climate Change Communication

Climate change became a political issue in the 1980s when NASA scientist James Hansen publicly warned that human induced greenhouse gas emissions caused the Earth's crust to experience rapid and unusual warming.<sup>97</sup> Hansen advised that political leaders needed to support policies to quickly reverse the warming trend or humans would experience devastating environmental and social implications. Federal agencies censored Hansen's reports and mainstream U.S. news posed global warming as a public and political debate, successfully confusing ordinary citizens and justifying delay of policies for climate change mitigation. Following 9-11, civil liberties were limited in the name of fighting a global war on terror.<sup>98</sup> Those acting against the dominating hegemonic control of the political right became terrorist, extremist, and alarmist. Robert L. Ivie<sup>99</sup> argues that systematically positioning dissenting views as irrational or agenda driven leads to citizen apathy, decreasing public participation and thus, weakening democracy. In the case of global warming, activists struggled to find legitimate venues for dissent and means to communicate symbols and messages to start a climate action movement.

As a way to gain legitimacy for environmental issues, environmentalists frequently have used ecology to support their arguments.<sup>100</sup> Ecological science has helped to further environmental arguments in the political sphere, with postpositivist epistemological constructs legitimizing environmentally based policies through providing an image of objectivity and rationality.<sup>101</sup> Further, technocratic expertise is often used to increase saliency in environmental conflict management processes.<sup>102</sup> Over

time, environmental problem solving processes and arguments have become rooted in and limited by science and technology, with mainstream environmental actors supporting policies that require decision makers to justify their choices as resulting from best available science, and their policies as prescribed by best available technology.<sup>103</sup> Although some environmentalists find this focus limiting, they are constrained by frequent accusations of being extremist, alarmist, or hysterical.<sup>104</sup> Within this political milieu, they have relied on science to maintain a strong defensive position that protects them from charges of being unreasonable and opposed to progress.

Anti-environmentalist groups from the political right have used a different, but equally fundamental, aspect of postpositivist science to support their own claims and to delegitimize environmental conservation efforts.<sup>105</sup> They have achieved varying levels of success in using the tenet that scientific conclusions are always uncertain, to prevent establishment of policies that might inhibit economic profits. For example, corporate efforts to persuade the U.S. government to oppose the international 1987 Montreal Protocol (an international agreement limiting substances that deplete the ozone layer) were unsuccessful; the United States joined other nations (with the exception of India) in signing an agreement that directly contributed to “normalization” of the earth’s atmosphere. On the other hand, despite unified support by European nations, the United States refused to support the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change presented at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environmental and Development, as well as the popularly titled Kyoto Protocol of 1997 or the Bali Agreement of 2007.<sup>106</sup> In line with these two actions, the George W. Bush administration has emphasized

scientific uncertainty as a means of thwarting attempts to establish state, federal, and international regulation of carbon dioxide emissions.

In 2002, political consultant Frank Lutz advised the Republican Party that, “the scientific debate [over global warming] is closing [against us] but not yet closed. There is still a window of opportunity to challenge the science.” He urged them to, “make the lack of scientific certainty a primary issue in the debate.”<sup>107</sup> The George W. Bush administration has followed this advice, successfully characterizing those who advocate for regulation as acting without sufficient information, and avoiding climate change policy with promises for further research and development of new carbon mitigation technologies<sup>108</sup>

Marginalized by anti-climate-science discourse for two decades, the issue of global warming broke into mainstream U.S. media in 2005 during and following the devastation fueled by Hurricane Katrina. Despite increased mainstream media coverage, however, those working to curb U.S. carbon emissions continued to be framed by corporate and political leaders as extremists, rather than moderate supporters of rational policy. Faced with continued public indifference to global warming, Bill McKibben, activist and author of books such as *The End of Nature* and *Stop Global Warming Now!*, stated in 2007 that what is missing is a social movement.<sup>109</sup> Climate change activists now struggle to communicate movement messages to a fragmented, decentralized, and apathetic citizenry. They use various media to articulate movement messages that may achieve sufficient resonance to affect social change.

### **Contemporary Social Movement Theory**

Social movement theory has evolved as society has changed. Classic movement theorists such as Chalmers Johnson, Edward Shils, and Charles Tilly, relied on the Marxist view of resource mobilization.<sup>110</sup> Stewart, Smith, and Denton argued that social movements focus on identities of movement participants with respect to charismatic leaders, where roles of the movement leaders and followers are apparent.<sup>111</sup> These movements were characterized as large and pervasive, with actions strategically opposing societal norms and values.<sup>112</sup> DeLuca and Buechler argue, however, that traditional movement theories overlook important social collectives whose memberships or affiliations involve participation by a fragmented citizenry or whose actions do not overtly challenge the political establishment.<sup>113</sup>

Buechler posits new social movements avoid co-optation by the conventional political system by rejecting current capitalist values such as materialism and basic ‘instrumental rationality of advanced capitalist society’,<sup>114</sup> in general. Further, social movements are no longer characterized by organized groups with persistent strategies.<sup>115</sup> Buechler explains,

New social movements function less as standing armies than as cultural laboratories that vacillate between latency and visibility as they episodically organize for specific battles and then revert to politicized subcultures that sustain movement visions and values for the next round of explicitly organized activism.<sup>116</sup>

Their activism entails episodic tactics that appeal to individual action and that contain symbols, signs, and meanings that resonate at multiple scales. As DeLuca argues, “...strategy should have a delimited role among an array of tactics more appropriate for political action in the diffuse and fragmented contemporary social field.”<sup>117</sup> Further, new social movements rely heavily on member values and identities to influence the political realm.

New social movements construct values and identities by way of symbols, meanings, and renaming, all of which occur within the context of everyday life.<sup>118</sup> New social movements use symbols to align a fragmented citizenry in relation to the movement. Movements also assign meaning to everyday phenomena to change how ordinary people experience the world in which they live. For example, in *Everything's Cool* melting glaciers provide the audience with a familiar symbol of climate change (Arctic warming), and the film assigns new meaning by visiting a Native Inupiat village that is forced to move due to the melting tundra. Melting glaciers come to mean displacement of marginalized peoples and threats to human habitat.

In renaming, material objects and relationships receive new names that change their significance. For example, Schutten explains that citizens participate in new social movements by “becoming fans of media programs/films that embody certain identities or political ideologies, purchasing products (e.g., symbolic jewelry and knick knacks, or organic products) and by publicly displaying symbols (e.g., via bumper stickers and t-shirts).”<sup>119</sup> Participants in new social movements saturate their daily lives with occasions of resistance and activism. In the case of climate action, participation in the movement



involves replacing incandescent light bulbs with fluorescent bulbs or adhering to the old adage: “reduce, reuse, recycle.” Movement members also align their identities with what they choose to refuse (e.g., gas guzzling trucks, grain-fed beef, excessive air travel, etc.). As participation in movement activities no longer necessarily means rising up in the streets, emphasis on identities that are based on everyday symbols becomes increasingly important as they signify movement membership and provide needed momentum for the cause. Identities also become more important as lines between public and collective lives are blurred. Buechler explains that new social movements account for this politicization of everyday life, and suggests that movement scholars should address how certain aspects of everyday life, such as new media that mediate activist communication on a daily basis, affect movement messaging and identities.<sup>120</sup>

### **New Media and Contemporary Activism**

New media technologies provide different, relatively safe opportunities for activists to meet like-minded people and to share ideas and tactics, all at speeds never before seen.<sup>121</sup> New media facilitate cyber-tactics (e.g., e-petitions, e-letter writing campaigns, and cyber marches) and provide enhanced means of information dissemination.<sup>122</sup> This affects how quickly movement messages are communicated and to whom. For example, in *Everything's Cool*, Ross Gelbspan, a Pulitzer Prize award winning journalist and writer, explains,

I think that rapid social change can happen as unexpectedly as rapid climate change. And I think of the overturning of the Berlin Wall in two years, I think of the overturning of apartheid very quickly, and there are all these groups like earth

worms who (are) moving around all over the country and something is going to catalyze a rapid, rapid change and I hope and think this movie could be part of it.

*Everything's Cool* uses DVDs and the Internet to spread a message of global warming activism. The extent to which web-based activist messages penetrate the mainstream public realm remains uncertain however.<sup>123</sup> For example, we still do not know whether campaign manager for U.S. presidential candidates find web-based activism cause for sufficient concern to influence the content of a political campaign.

New media also support cyber-networking opportunities. With cyber-networking movement members share messages through symbols, meaning, and ideologies. For example, one symbol of the climate change movement involves pictures of and references to feet walking (e.g., Working Films' logo is a caricature of feet walking, StepItUp2007.org, 5-Day Walk across Vermont, etc.). The film affixes meaning to the symbol by following the moving feet of climate change activists, implying that those who participate in this movement act. Further, walking feet depict the climate action ideology that ordinary citizens have a responsibility to participate in the movement in the physical realm. Although new media, in general, provide select opportunities to participate in rallies or other public or private<sup>124</sup> events they are not requirements to be a member of some contemporary movements. In fact, activists take part in other cyber-based movements by staying informed via emails, online alternative news sources, blogging, and discussion lists and chat forums.<sup>125</sup> However, climate change activists in particular use symbols and meaning to suggest participation in the movement means active involvement in the physical realm.

Further, hyper-reflexivity and imagery capabilities of new media provide environmental actors with the ability to reach the public through image events known as ‘mind bombs’.<sup>126</sup> Image events have typically referred to extreme acts done by organizations such as Greenpeace or by individuals participating in major protest events such as the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle to gain mainstream media attention. Within the context provided by new media, image events may now include the use of a steady and endless stream of images that depict local activism occurring simultaneously around the globe. The pervasive dissemination, more than extremity or novelty, creates message intensity. DeLuca argues that, within a late-capitalist context, image events deployed at local scales fall outside the modernistic frame of politics because they, “contest social norms and deconstruct the established naming of the world.”<sup>127</sup> Many environmental issues fall outside problem solving processes that rely on an economic framework. Further, the decentralized power structure of industrialism leaves activists nothing to overthrow. Internet and DVD mediated messages enable decentralized resistance because they are as readily available to individuals working in local contexts as to powerful elites working at the federal or international level. New media also provide public venues for cultural and symbolic forms of resistance communication that alter existing power structures.<sup>128</sup> Through new media, activists may bypass the political constraints of mainstream news for a more diffuse means of communication—one that questions identities and power structures. In all these ways and more, activists may use new media to rename or redefine issues and reconfigure power roles.<sup>129</sup>

One of the more traditionally pervasive mediums to enable movement ideologies to challenge existing power structures is the documentary film. The documentary film genre is traditionally known for its intent to inform the public on specific issues while simultaneously entertaining them. Documentary filmmakers—often activists themselves—are tasked with helping the public understand and accept a different view of the world around them.<sup>130</sup> The documentary film supports development of new worldviews by using rhetorics of truth-telling and unveiling.<sup>131</sup> Using such rhetorical motifs, filmmakers forgo what is known as ‘balanced journalism’ to provide a concentrated view that makes the audience feel they are finally getting the real story. Filmmakers use editing and camera manipulation to frame a story or a shot. For example, in the case of nature photography, early Yosemite photographers failed to capture Native Americans as part of the natural landscape, contributing to the notion that environmental preservation means protection of a sublime, uninhabited nature.<sup>132</sup> Filmmakers today frame shots and stories to depict scenarios that further their interpretation. Filmmakers might choose to film older, less visually stimulating characters to represent the opposition while reserving youthful, more appealing actors as the key protagonist or hero in the film. Thus, activists can use the documentary genre to vilify their opponents and to glorify proponents.

In the context of new media, the documentary film is no longer limited to the big screen; instead, activists now pass DVDs of their favorite films between individuals and small groups. The DVD offers more potential for interactivity, allowing activists to choose which scenes to view, what order to view them, and which scenes to share with a

group or view individually. DVDs also require few resources to acquire or view. New media capabilities now support the use of DVDs in open source activism. Activists now hold the potential to use the documentary film via open source activism as a rhetorical exercise in agitation. Robert West from Working Films explains, “The idea is not to do this stuff in isolation of the film, but (to) have the film be of service to the activists.”<sup>133</sup> *Everything’s Cool* activists hold roundtable discussions and teach-ins to educate the public about global warming and to discuss what they can do collectively to make a difference. What is less certain is how activists implement the strategies to facilitate movement participation.

## **Everything’s Cool**

### **Background and Methods**

*Everything’s Cool* debuted in 2007 amidst the release of other notable global warming documentaries including Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* and Leonardo DiCaprio’s *Eleventh Hour*. Although the other films grossed more at the box office and starred noteworthy actors, *Everything’s Cool* is noteworthy because of the filmmaker’s explicit attempt to use new media as a means of open source activism. Working Films produced two versions of the film: one for general audiences which was shown at film festivals around the globe such as Sundance, Full Frames, and Hot Dogs; and a second subtitled “Activist Version”. The Activist Version is shorter (61 minutes) compared to the full length version (76 minutes). The longer version caters to a general audience, with goofy characters (e.g., snow makers clocked in on a balmy January day waiting to make snow for anxious snow boarders) and funny stories related to climate change (e.g.,

a man talking on the phone while he sits on a 2-gallon bucket with the word “Methanol” written on it; the man on the other end of the conversation is describing the dangers of being exposed to methanol). The Activist Version also omits eccentric pro-global warming characters, and focuses more on the movement’s struggles with anti-climate-science actors.

In fall of 2007 the producers of *Everything’s Cool* joined with the nationwide organizers of Step It Up! 2007 (SIU), a web-based organizer’s hub for climate action, to reach a group of ordinary citizens turned local activists (those who participated in the April 14<sup>th</sup> Nationwide Day of Climate Action across the United States) and asked the new local activists to host a film screening. *Everything’s Cool* producers offered local activists a copy (DVD) of the Activist Version for \$10, a way to connect with members of the public by advertising their event on EverythingsCool.org, and printable pre-made *Everything’s Cool* screening flyers.

*Everything’s Cool* starred major climate change actors such as Dr. James Hansen, journalist Ross Gelbspan, writer–activist Bill McKibben, and the Weather Channel’s first full-time climatologist, Dr. Heidi Cullen. The point of the film was to expose strategic use of anti-climate-science rhetorics communicated by the political right and persuade ordinary citizens to rise up to affect change.<sup>134</sup> Because I wanted to explore relationships between new media and open source activism, and to suggest implications for new social movement building, I used critical rhetorical analysis (CRA) to examine the Activist Version of the film.<sup>135</sup> To obtain an idea of how *Everything’s Cool* used new media as a means for open source activism I hosted an activist screening. Approximately

35 people (all self-identified scientists) attended the screening and afterward, we participated in a roundtable discussion on science and advocacy.

Along with CRA, participant observation (PO) of the activist screening and roundtable discussion allowed me to interact with and experience the climate action and scientist culture that was represented at the event. Moreover, experiencing the screening in person allowed me to see how the film might be experienced by an audience, whereas CRA allowed me to examine the film's connection to existing social and political contexts. I integrated my PO into my CRA by working from field notes taken at the screening and transcripts of the discussion that followed. Consistent with the goals suggested by CRA, I organized my observations according to themes related to movement identities, power roles, and movement struggles. Since observations made at the screening are used to inform findings drawn from my examination of the film, I do not attempt to generalize my *Everything's Cool* screening to other locations, event types, or participant experiences.

## **Analyses**

### *Documentary Genre*

The tag line for *Everything's Cool, A Toxic Comedy About Global Warming!*, clearly denotes the intentions of Working Films to portray the harrowing and sobering tale of global warming in an understandable, accessible, and somewhat humorous way. Though described as a comedy, the film does in fact fall into the documentary genre. The documentary genre offers filmmakers creative freedom to convey and interpret events and their implications to a select and interested audience.<sup>136</sup> Rather than produce

a depressing, educational film on global climate change, the filmmaker's intent was to raise the spirits of and inform ordinary citizens interested in the issue of climate change, to compel them to take a stand against global warming. As Scott Foundas from *Variety* magazine put it, "*Everything's Cool* can be downright euphoric in its sense of ordinary people doing their part for the planet..."<sup>137</sup>

Politically-charged documentary films often function to unveil or uncover oppression or power imbalances by pointing out absurdities of everyday socio-political or cultural norms. This idea is illustrated in the opening scene of the movie where the film crew is shown driving around the United States, asking passersby to solve a word puzzle written on the side of their truck:

G \_ \_ B \_ L \_ \_ R \_ \_ N G

The word game's clue is: *More threatening than weapons of mass destruction.*

Responses included:

A late twenty-something man wrinkled his brow as he worked through the puzzle: "gambling??...Global Warming! Oh, we do, we watch *Jeopardy* every night too. We shoulda got that!"

A forty-something man from Ohio scowled at them and grouched, "More threatening than weapons of mass destruction? Much less threatening guys, come on. Use your head. It's anti-American."

A sixty-something man from Florida who thought the picture of a drought was from an atomic blast was visibly shaken when he learned it was the affect of a heat wave: "heat wave? My goodness Christ."



A woman from Tennessee patiently explained, “One day soon, Jesus Christ as your Savior, you’re gonna be home with Him and this isn’t gonna matter”.

A smiling woman donning Mardi gras beads paused to respond: “I think that it’s probably true but I don’t think that we’re causing it. I think it’s the *nature* of things...like *before Noah*, we had global warming.”

Another man shivered in his light winter jacket, “It’s kinda cold out here; global warming sounds pretty good on a day like today.”

The opening sequence illustrates the wide array of responses and understandings of global warming the film crew encountered across the United States. It also indicates that climate change views promoted by mainstream media, corporate interests, and the federal government have successfully influenced what the public knows and understands about the topic.

Further into the movie, the audience sees Fox News clips of climate change activists debating scientists, where the debate host clearly favors climate change opponents. The audience then learns the scientists featured on this episode of Fox News are on the payroll of Exxon-Mobil. *Everything’s Cool* also shows a clip from a Congressional hearing where a proponent of continuing status quo practices describes global warming as, “...the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on to the American public.” Through images such as these, the filmmakers expose misconduct and agenda setting by the opposition to make the viewer feel betrayed or misled. The viewer is doubly betrayed by Congress who is supposed to work for the American public as opposed to a

corporation or its shareholders. After watching the film, a scientist at the activist screening picked up on the challenges faced by global warming scientists,

There is so much data/information available that you could cite [a] source and odds are, no one's going to [check on] it. But the mere fact that you said it—and it might say the exact opposite of [what] your interpretation of it is—but the fact that you put it on there, people are like, 'oh, they know what they are talking about' and just assume that it is correct...The problem is there is too much to read. No one can possibly back check on every paper cited in a paper.

*Everything's Cool* provides its audience with insight into the difficulties faced by global warming messengers with respect to scientific misrepresentation and to the challenges of countering these misrepresentations. The film shows that, not only is climate science co-opted by the fossil fuel industry, but arguments against anti-climate-science rhetorics are diffused by mainstream media and the federal government, making producers and proponents of climate change science appear as irrational and fringe voices.

As mentioned earlier, the documentary genre depicts rhetorics of truth-telling. In *Everything's Cool* the filmmakers use narrative to reframe climate change activists as reasonable and rational and their opponents as fraudulent and deceiving. For example, in the film, climate change activists such as Ross Gelbspan and Bill McKibben are shot in their natural settings—at home. They are shot outdoors, making them appear healthy, relaxed, and perhaps, like your own neighbor next door. By contrast, the filmmakers capture Phillip Clooney, the man accused of editing climate science reports, leaving his

Washington, DC office and walking briskly down the street. The filmmakers then slow the tape and play it in reverse. Finally, the camera zooms in on a blurry close-up of the side of Clooney's face. The narrator explains that regardless of the amount of media attention he received, to date, that blurry picture was Clooney's only public appearance on film. The audience then learns that a few days following the shooting of that scene, Clooney resigned from his government post, and went to work for Exxon-Mobil. This scene in the film exemplifies how the documentary genre enables *Everything's Cool* to expose deceptive behavior on behalf of climate science opponents, filling in pieces missing from mainstream media and providing its audience with a sense of having the inside scoop on what really happened.

The documentary film also uses aspects of story-telling and truth-telling to communicate a sense of urgency/exigency to its viewers. In *Everything's Cool*, filmmakers encourage ordinary citizens that the time has come to act on global warming. The film begins with jack-in-the-box like music. The music is slow and the narrator's voice is calm:

At the turn of the twenty-first century, several thousand tons of scientific studies on climate change all led to a single, revolutionary conclusion [wall of file boxes crashes down]: By burning fossil fuels human beings are changing the planet, (a lot).

The following lines then fly across the screen:

Houston: We have a problem

Miami: We have a problem

Venice: We have a problem

New Delhi: We have a problem

New Orleans, New York, Tokyo, Tel Aviv [etc.]...: We have a problem

Planet Earth: We have a problem

Later, when the filmmakers discover ignorance or encounter suppression, the slow, steady jack-in-the-box music occurs once again. By the end of the film, the jack-in-the-box tune plays rapidly, escalating via a crescendo that ends with a loud bang. To build a successful social movement, citizens must not only recognize and feel disgusted with oppression, but they must reach a point where they feel the only solution is to agitate for change.<sup>138</sup> The filmmakers have successfully used both audio and visual symbols to amplify the sense of urgency to encourage viewers to agitate for changes to the status quo.

### *Everyday Resistance*

Filmmakers not only need to upset and rile their viewers, they need to show citizens what they can do to make a difference. In the case of the climate change movement, this is done using examples that include, but also transcend, everyday resistance. Filmmakers Judith Helfand and Daniel Gold describe the film,

While the industry funded naysayers sing what just might be their swan song of scientific doubt and deception, a group of self-appointed global warming messengers are on a life or death quest to find the iconic image, proper language, and points of leverage that will help the public go from understanding the

urgency of the problem to creating the political will necessary to push for a new energy economy. Hold on...this is bigger than changing your light bulbs.<sup>139</sup>

Everyday resistance involves negotiating the blurred public–private divide to make activism a part of a daily routine or lifestyle and redefine what participation in the movement entails. Activists use movement symbols and ideas to link a disenfranchised, fragmented citizenry. Activists then use new media and open source activism to translate symbols and ideas into meanings and action, making identification with the climate movement easier.

As mentioned earlier, one theme passed between web-based climate action hubs involves bodily movement. For example, in the *Activist Version of Everything's Cool* (Note: not seen in the full length version) scene transitions are denoted by the camera focusing on the moving feet of the film's key protagonists. For example, Rick Piltz's loafers climb the stairs to his office, Bill McKibben's boots hike out of the woods, hundreds of tennis shoes round the shoulder of a busy highway curve in Vermont, etc. These transitions provide a repeated symbol of participation in the movement that transcends group boundaries and expands what it means to participate in the climate change movement beyond light bulbs, green power, and recycling. The protagonists whose feet provide transitions from one scene to another have put their bodies on the line, materially engaging with the effort to promote change.

Filmmakers also promote viewer identification with climate change advocates through good guy-bad guy; hero-villain divisions.<sup>140</sup> *Everything's Cool* portrays the protagonist of the film, journalist and global warming messenger Ross Gelbspan, as fun,

friendly, and down-to-earth. Viewers meet a jovial Gelbspan inside the foyer of his home, where he wails on a harmonica. The camera then follows Gelbspan up his stairs to a bright green office that is cluttered with boxes and stacks of climate change news/reports. Gelbspan is not a climate science expert nor is he an eccentric.

*Everything's Cool* portrays Gelbspan as a tragic hero; an ordinary and interested citizen who has selflessly dedicated his career to something as overwhelming as global warming. Most importantly, Gelbspan is easily recognizable to most Americans; he holds familiar American family values and is compassionate about the future of the world in which we all live. For example, viewers learn that Gelbspan is a father (e.g., lying on a porch hammock he voices concerns about the future of his daughters and their struggles as they grow into young activists), a husband (e.g., he and his wife hold hands on the couch as they watch climate policy news unfold), and a modest innovator (e.g., he agrees to give talks to high school students hoping his message will motivate a younger crowd). *Everything's Cool* depicts those who participate in climate action as reasonable, humble, and familiar. The point is to make identification as a climate activist both comfortable and accessible.

By contrast, *Everything's Cool* portrays the key opponent in the film, fossil fuel lobbyist Myron Edell (pronounced "Ee-vil" in the film) as lazy and odd. The camera follows Edell to work, where he appears bored and disinterested. When questioned, the camera zooms in very close to his face, making his skin appear pasty and ill. The microphone picks up sniffing and sucking noises coming from his nose and his mouth.

By depicting this anti climate scientist negatively, *Everything's Cool* makes it easy for the audience to identify with anyone else, including climate change activists.

### *Power Roles*

Social change and movement building requires people to shift hegemonic relationships from existing oppressive patterns of domination to (hopefully) those that are less horrendous or violent in their oppression.<sup>141</sup> As mentioned earlier, the climate action movement is oppressed by: 1) anti-climate-science rhetoric coming from the far right and 2) public participation barriers that exist in a post 9-11 political milieu. Used as open source activism, *Everything's Cool* contributes to this redistribution of power in three, sometimes ironic ways. First, it encourages viewers to reconsider the respect traditionally given to science and technology in Western culture. Instead of reinforcing the role of technocracy in environmental decision making processes, the film relies less on scientific expertise (using it only to highlight the rationality of climate science, e.g., Dr. Heidi Cullen taking care to maintain objectivity during the peak of Hurricane Katrina) and more on citizen activism. A viewer at the *Everything's Cool* screening dejectedly noted this absence: “You don’t see scientists in the film, you see thousands of reports filed away in boxes—that is what you see of scientists.” For this scientist, the filmmakers’ choice to keep scientists in the background emphasized how difficult it was for scientists to negotiate their responsibility to conduct ‘objective’ science, while encouraging proper use and interpretation of scientific results.

The film includes scenes with President Bush describing climate science as uncertain, and therefore inappropriate as a basis for policy development. After viewing

the film, audience members reflected on how fundamental uncertainty is to science. One viewer explained, “As a scientist and just as a reader of science...the goal . . . is to not only build a wall but to attempt to break it yourself--- you are trying to throw bricks at a wall to try to determine how solid it is.” She and others expressed frustration that climate science opponents characterized uncertainty as abnormal (as opposed to normal) science, and used this characterization to distort environmental decision making. The experience of viewing and discussing the film provided an opportunity for scientists to reflect on the role of science in society, and to consider how they might redefine their roles as citizen-scientists:

I think scientists know how to communicate they just don't do it. And then we all think we're important and we write in our little obscure journal. The four other people in the world that study what we study read it and we somehow think that we've like solved the problem but we're not communicating to the people that matter, that need to hear it, you know.

*Everything's Cool* encourages scientists to see that what they do as active and informed citizens matters at least as much as their actions as part of the scientific establishment.<sup>142</sup>

Second, *Everything's Cool* attempted to reshape the current power structure by providing mainstream and easily accessible ways to participate in the climate action movement. Specifically, it facilitates a power shift by: 1) framing ordinary citizens as climate change activists and 2) using new media and open source activism as safe venues for movement messaging and dissent. The Activist Version of *Everything's Cool* includes special activist extras (additional tracks) that depict how people have made



changes in their everyday life that positively impact global warming. One clip follows the development of an urban organic farm on Chicago's Southside. An urban farmer explains,

I'm more interested in the solutions. But, I'm not: *global warming, global warming, global warming*. You know, I'm: *it can be done in a renewable way, in an environmentally friendly way, in a human oriented way*. It can be done in a way that is very elegant. And yes, it will also, you know, help us end this crisis of global warming.

The interview provides encouragement in the face of determined inertia from the national level, by suggesting that individual action can have an impact on the global phenomenon of climate change.

Finally, throughout the duration of the film, *Everything's Cool* builds viewer tension until finally, in the last seconds of the film viewers are directed to [everythingscool.org](http://everythingscool.org) to find out what they can do and how they can act. Further, on the back side of the DVD sleeve, viewers are encouraged to, "MAKE A DIFFERENCE. Go to the TAKE ACTION section of [everythingscool.org](http://everythingscool.org) for suggestions on how to get involved in the *Everything's Cool* campaign." The DVD itself is a tool activists can pass on to their friends after the screening, allowing other ordinary citizens to self-identify as climate change activists. As open source activism, *Everything's Cool* directly contributes to developing and strengthening a new and growing group of leaders for future agitation.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

*Everything's Cool* activists successfully used new media and open source activism as a rhetorical exercise in agitation to refigure public understanding of climate science and attitudes toward U.S. climate change policy. Further, by combining the documentary film genre with open source activism *Everything's Cool* activists strategically managed movement messages to help make accessible and acceptable the identity of what it means to be a climate activist. The concept of everyday resistance helped to illustrate how *Everything's Cool* aligned the ordinary citizen with the tragic hero, redefining the role of a leader in new media based movements. In turn, *Everything's Cool* helped to rhetorically constitute a new kind of citizen activist, shifting power roles from the centralized hegemonic control of the political right to a decentralized grassroots network of local leaders and changing how movement messages are communicated and by whom.

*Everything's Cool* activists used new media and open source activism to facilitate the communication of climate movement messages to start a climate action movement. New media and open source activism allowed activists to build onto and refresh an embryonic local leader network (initiated by Step It Up! 2007) to help build movement membership and saliency for the cause. New media also allowed activists to provide new significance to established movement symbols (such as walking or stepping) and ideas (participation in the physical realm). By depicting movement messengers as ordinary people, *Everything's Cool* activists decreased barriers to participation that might be experienced by people who were uncertain about the safety of participating in political

agitation. For citizens confused by anti-climate-science rhetorics, the film exposes right wing rhetorics, strategically aligning viewer sympathy with climate change actors. Used as open source activism, the documentary film genre enabled activists to encourage participation in the climate change movement by identifying it as a compassionate response to an urgent threat. By identifying climate change advocacy as an activity of ordinary citizens, it also increased the potential longevity and momentum of climate science and related advocacy messages.

New media and open source activism also facilitated a shift in power from the hegemonic control of the political right to a burgeoning group of local leaders. This shift in power may lead to increased opportunities for environmental networking and for developing new venues for environmental problem solving processes. Using the documentary genre and the DVD, activists are also able to pass a virtual torch for climate action. Not only are the DVDs transferable, they function as testimony of the past for future climate activists who can build on meanings and ideas in creative ways. New activists can interpret past events in the context of new socio-political events, providing endless opportunities for reinventing the movement.

The use of *Everything's Cool* as open source activism suggests that documentary film, new media, and open source activism offer a powerful tool for social movement organizers and agitators. Purposeful use of documentary film as open source activism may facilitate the communication of movement messages, especially if organizers are able to: 1) Keep the message light-hearted and entertaining—ordinary citizens need positive messages to contribute in constructive ways; 2) Be creative—with means of

communication as well as pathways to solutions; 3) Use symbols to increase saliency for movement messages and ideals—strengthen peoples’ personal identities with climate change activism through the use of positive, compassionate messages conveyed through non threatening, recognizable symbols; 4) Align movement identities—to unite a diverse, fragmented citizenry and to align the identities of those comfortable with participating in web-based activism with those acting in the physical realm; 5) Network—and, look for new ways to build upon, expand, and support burgeoning grassroots networks.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION: COOLING DOWN

On April 16, 2008, President George W. Bush announced a plan to stop the growth of greenhouse emissions in the United States by 2025. These reductions, he says, depend on “accelerating the development and deployment of new technologies.”<sup>143</sup> Maintaining the stance he took on climate change in 2001, Bush says federal and international policies that mandate the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions may have a negative effect on the economy, and are therefore not viable. Bush agreed with Representative John Dingell’s (Democrat, Michigan) statement that regulating carbon emissions under the Clean Air Act would be “a glorious mess.”<sup>144</sup> Bush framed his approach as more democratic than regulation, which would put decisions in the hands of unelected bureaucrats or judges, rather than officials such as himself, who have been elected to represent the public.

Though the issue of climate change is now more than two decades old, and has gained saliency in the mainstream media, climate change activists see that U.S. political rhetoric on the issue continues virtually unchanged.<sup>145</sup> Instead of argument over what sort of regulatory structure would be most effective in mitigating human induced carbon emissions, U.S. climate activists operate within a political landscape that urges the public to distrust climate science, while trusting in future technology. In 2008, for example, Bush explained,

Climate change involves complicated science and generates vigorous debate...

Over the past seven years, my administration has taken a rational, balanced approach to these serious challenges. We believe we need to protect our environment. We believe we need to strengthen our energy security. We believe we need to grow our economy. And we believe the only way to achieve these goals is through continued advances in technology.<sup>146</sup>

This speech provides an excellent example of the post 9-11 political context that challenges climate action, as well as other environmental activists. As with any persistent barrage, the ongoing political rhetoric targeting climate science and environmental conservation of all sorts has had an anesthetizing affect on the American public. Faced with a defensively apathetic citizenry, environmental activists may find new media useful for encouraging people to experiment with dissent. In this thesis I examined how the climate action movement—specifically, SIU and EverythingsCool.org—used new media via open source activism to build a social movement. I provided two analyses that illuminate how new media provide a context that enables contemporary activism to contribute to movement building. In the first essay I relied on the work of Chantal Mouffe and Robert L. Ivie to explain that democracy requires appropriate venues for dissent to thrive.<sup>147</sup> Negotiating post 9-11 political contexts, climate activists struggle to find safe venues to protest in the public sphere. New media hold great potential for activists looking for new venues for dissent that combine technological capabilities of the Internet with on the ground action. In the second essay, I relied on the work of Steven Buechler and Kevin DeLuca to account for

Western culture's use of symbols, ideals, and meanings to align individual identities with social movement in everyday lives.<sup>148</sup> As anti-climate-science and fear-based rhetorics delegitimize movement ideologies in the mainstream media, new media provide opportunities for contemporary activists to communicate movement symbols and ideas in ways that allow ordinary citizens to identify with and participate in the movements in meaningful ways. This thesis contributes to new social movement theory by examining how activists use<sup>149</sup> new media technologies via open source activism to contribute to a social movement. In the remainder of this chapter I review what I learned throughout the course of the project, and discuss implications of my findings for democracy and new social movements.

### **Review of Findings**

In chapter I, I introduced issues faced by the climate action movement in a post 9-11 political context and the need to respond to anti-climate-science rhetorics of the political right. I explained that while negotiating citizen apathy, those attempting to build a climate action movement struggle to find appropriate venues to voice dissent and to communicate movement messages. New media provide an important context for social movement building in the twenty-first century, including opportunities for finding or developing new venues for dissent.

I used the opportunity provided by contemporary political oppression of environmental (and other) dissent to explore how activists use new media to build a movement.<sup>150</sup> I then provided a brief account of how new media change how information is disseminated. In particular, the hypermediacy of the Internet offers

endless opportunities for activists seeking to communicate in ways that lead to agitation for change. Despite considerable research on relationships between new media and social movements, no research has focused on how activists use new media and open source activism to agitate for change. In this thesis I address this research opportunity by following activist organizations that used new media and open source activism to build a movement. Although we know that new media changes environmental activism, this research bridges an important gap between what is known about new media and social movement building and how activists use them on the ground.

In chapter II, I explained that in a post 9-11 context citizen participation in environmental decision making processes is compromised due to increased emphasis on homeland security in the wake of President Bush's war on terror. I used theory developed by Mouffe and Ivie to explain that democracies require participation by an active and informed citizenry to thrive,<sup>151</sup> and that participation requires venues for legitimized dissent. This is obtained, Mouffe says, by agonistic pluralism where multiple, divergent voices debate in public spaces; with the expectation that their views will differ. Rather than censoring dissent, a thriving democracy legitimizes and protects it. I then explained that the current political regime in the United States has weakened democracy by limiting dissent. Along with framing dissent as dangerous, a prolonged barrage of anti-climate-science rhetoric has contributed to citizen apathy. Using the case study of SIU, I explored how new media technologies may facilitate public participation in climate change activism by providing relatively safe venues for dissent. I focused on how the Internet facilitated and constrained aspects of participation including access and



the development of an informed citizenry. I then examined how new media affected power roles. I found SIU cast a wide net by providing ordinary citizens information and tools needed to participate in the movement. Step It Up offered those unfamiliar with climate activism support and networking opportunities needed to obtain access to the movement. Further, I found that by using Internet mediated activism and networking tactics, SIU created a new group of local leaders, shifting power away from the federal government to grassroots and individual levels.

In chapter III, I explained that along with post 9-11 constraints on dissent, anti-climate-science rhetoric challenges climate change activists to find appropriate venues for communication that contributes to movement building. Using the basic idea that science is always uncertain, opponents of new policy development successfully frame climate science as abnormally (rather than normally) uncertain. Further, the mainstream media has followed the lead of mainstream political leaders. I used the work of Steven Buechler and Kevin DeLuca to provide a cultural lens for examining new social movements.<sup>152</sup> I reviewed how citizens now participate in movements in their day to day lives, through consumer based activities or by donning movement symbols.<sup>153</sup> I then explained that as movement membership continues to blur public/private lines, identity as a movement member or as an activist becomes increasingly important.<sup>154</sup>

I used the case study of EverythingsCool.org to examine how social movement activists used the DVD (documentary film) via open source activism as a rhetorical exercise in agitation. My analysis focused on three concepts critical to the relationship

between the use of the film and social movement building: the documentary genre, everyday resistance, and power roles.

I found *Everything's Cool* activists used new media and open source activism as a rhetorical exercise in agitation to refigure public understanding of climate science and attitudes toward U.S. climate change policy. They used movement symbols, meanings, and ideas to help make participation in the climate action movement broadly accessible and acceptable. Further, my focus on everyday resistance helped demonstrate how *Everything's Cool* aligned the ordinary citizen with the tragic hero, redefining the role of a leader in new media based movements. Finally, I found *Everything's Cool* helped to develop a new group of local citizen activists, once again shifting power roles from the federal government to grassroots and local levels.

### **Implications**

My analyses of the climate change movement indicated web-based activists used new media technologies to reduce barriers to participation to help start a movement. By reducing participatory barriers, SIU began developing a new group of local leaders, shifting power from federal to local levels. This shift in power has implications for environmental conflict management processes and for addressing needs of marginalized groups. For example, new media might provide opportunities for access to new types of stakeholders—who may or may not have a direct stake in any one particular issue. Also, new media holds potential for marginalized groups looking to gain membership, momentum, and saliency for a cause.

This research also revealed that those seeking to build a social movement can use new media to enable people who have never met each other to collaborate on environmental problem solving processes. New media enable movement organizers and advocates to share symbols, meanings, and ideas to galvanize an otherwise fragmented and apathetic citizenry. I also found that activists used new media as a rhetorical exercise in agitation. The hypermediacy of new media provides endlessly spooling opportunities for activists to explore new, technology mediated episodic tactics to participate in the physical sphere. Further, new media encourage people to participate in the climate action movement using everyday resistance. This helps reframe participation in the climate action movement, or any social movement, as an ordinary practice. Realigning citizen identities consistently with agitation may increase public participation and thus, contribute to an increasingly vitalized democracy.

## NOTES

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- <sup>4</sup> Candace Cohn, "The Assault on Civil Liberties," *International Socialist Review* 22 (2002), 18-31; Ivie, "Prologue to Democratic Dissent" *Jasnost*.
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- <sup>13</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
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- <sup>91</sup> Buechler, *Social Movements in Advanced Capitalism*; DeLuca, *Image Politics*.
- <sup>92</sup> Schutten, "Invoking "Practical Magic.""
- <sup>93</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*.
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**APPENDIX A****Nationwide Research Team on Step It Up Event Protocol- April 2007**

1. How did you hear about this event/rally? When did you hear about this event/rally?
2. What brought you out here today? What is the main reason you decided to come to this rally?
3. What is your understanding of the issue?
4. How has this issue affected you personally? Your family and friends?
5. What do you hope to accomplish by being here today? How do you hope to make a difference?
6. Do you think Washington/Congress will listen?
7. What do you think of this approach / format of the national rally/event? Local rally/event?
8. What makes it different than other events/rally?
9. How has participating in this event affected you personally?
10. What made you want to be a local organizer? (Organizers only)
11. Why did you choose the specific format that you did? (Organizers only)
12. Do you think it is successful?



## **APPENDIX B**

### **Unstructured Interview Protocol: SIU Headquarters March 2007**

1. Tell me about yourself. What do you do?
2. How did you get involved with the climate action movement and, specifically, SIU?
3. What does a typical day look like for you?
4. What does it mean to participate in SIU?
5. Tell me about your experiences with the Internet. How is it used in contemporary activism and/or how has it changed how we go about doing activism?
6. Ask directed question about the specific role the organizer plays in the day to day operations of SIU
7. Was there anything you thought I should have asked or possibly, missed? (Is there anything else you would like to add?)

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