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Using Email to Create Collective Identity

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Abstract

The internet has changed the ability of social movements to carry out political organizing. It has also become a tool for expressing movement identities. Wall (2007) has argued that collective identity can be fostered through the frames created, the boundaries drawn and the emotional investment established by the movements. This paper examines how the social movement MoveOn has used email to express a collective identity. The use of frames, boundaries and emotional investment within these emails are the focus of this study.

Introduction

The relationship between the media and social movements has been a research topic since the late 1960s. The earliest research examined coverage of important movements including the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the rise of feminism.[1] As Gitlin points out, television did not invent radical movements or demonstrations, but the system of mass communication was and is important in helping shape a specific environment for movements of opposition.[2] The media environment has changed dramatically over the past 40 plus years. With the advent of the user friendly World Wide Web in the 1990s came a new interactive form of media that could be used as a tool by activists. As Chadwick points out, the online environment now provides citizens with opportunities to organize their offline engagement in campaigns through physical attendance at rallies and fundraising events, but it also provides a potentially rich number of solely online political actions: e-mail, chat, discussion forums, blogs, instant messaging, content management, quick fire donation drives, ratings systems, and other forms of "social software"[3]

This paper will examine how the internet, in particular email, is being used by the social movement MoveOn. To begin it would be useful to discuss what a social movement is. A modern social movement can be described as collective action. According to Tarrow, it is by mounting collective actions, organizers become focal points that transform external opportunities, conventions and resources into movements.[4] Repertoires of contention, social networks, and cultural frames are used to bring people together in collective action and create a broader more widely diffused movement. Collective action repertoires include conventional action, disruptive action and violence. In framing movement organizers don't only build on inherited cultural understandings, but they also compete with the framing that goes on all the time through the media. The media transmit messages that movements must attempt to shape and influence. Influencing framing is important to the movement's efforts to use the media as a tool for organization. Tarrow states that, "just as movements build on existing social networks, they use the external resources of the media to try to mobilize a following."[5] According to Melissa Wall, "email is part of the activist's cyber-toolkit, used to mobilize and educate movement actors by providing quick, constantly updated information, as well as easing many logistical communication tasks."[6]

A social movement can also be defined as "a sustained and self conscious challenge to authorities or cultural codes by a field of actors- organizations and advocacy networks- some of whom employ extra-institutional means of influence."[7] Postmes and Brunsting have argued that the internet may allow social movement actors to unite and act more easily, attracting more new members than otherwise would be possible.[8] Central to the movement is the creation of a collective identity to help recruit and sustain members.

Melucci has defined collective identity as a "shared definition produced by several interacting individuals

who are concerned with the orientations of their actions as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their actions take place."[9] Collective identity occurs through the production of cognitive definitions that establish movement goals, the establishment of a network of relationships among actors to communicate and negotiate, and the creation of emotional investment in which movement members feel as if they belong to the movement, allowing them to recognize themselves in each other.[10] According to Wall "collective identity defines boundaries of who is within the group, what the group believes, how the group sees the world and, ultimately, helps to establish trust, which is essential in getting members to take actions that may be time-consuming, uncomfortable or even dangerous. Because collective identity is ultimately a cultural process manifested through language and symbols, communication resources are necessary for any of these processes to succeed."[11] According to Wall's research, the internet is a useful, but limited tool as a means for expressing movement identities.

Not only is the internet a tool for expressing movement identities, but it also is changing the ability of social movements to carry out political organizing, or what researchers are calling, "electronic" advocacy.[12] Collection of information, publication of information, dialogue, coordinating action and lobbying decision makers are five general modes of internet communication by social movement activists that Denning has identified.[13] Researchers have also argued that the internet has become a means of countering the status quo, which tends to dominate most political discussions.[14] Grass-roots groups are empowered by the internet because it allows them to create networks of citizens to challenge the status quo.[15]

One group that has been successful in creating a network of citizens has been MoveOn. According to Chadwick, MoveOn's initial website, set up at a cost of just $89, contained an online petition requesting that Congress pass a simple censure motion rather than go through impeachment hearings, and "move on" to more pressing policy issues.[16] Within a month of its launch, the petition had amassed over a quarter of a million signatories and MoveOn had recruited over 2,000 volunteers.[17] Also in its first month, these volunteers distributed 20,000 paper comments to politicians and presented hard copies of the petitions to some 226 representatives.[18] By Christmas 1998, the number of signatories had grown to 450,000.[19] Not only was MoveOn able to quickly mobilize, but it was also able to carry on the movement after the Lewinsky scandal died down by shifting its focus. Over the years the group has been able to diversify its operations and become involved in anti-war efforts, campaign finance reform, FCC/Media reform and political campaigning to name a few.

On its website MoveOn describes itself as follows:

> The MoveOn family of organizations brings real Americans back into the political process. With over 3.2 million members across America- from carpenters to stay-at-home moms to business-leaders- we work together to realize the progressive promise of our country. MoveOn is a service- a way for busy but concerned citizens to find their political voice in a system dominated by big money and big media. The MoveOn family of organizations is made up of a couple of different pieces. MoveOn.org Civic Action, a 501 (c) (4) nonprofit organization, formerly known just as MoveOn.org primarily focuses on education and advocacy on important national issues. MoveOn.org Political Action, a federal PAC, formerly known as MoveOn PAC, mobilizes people across the country to fight important battles in Congress and help elected candidates who reflect our values. Both organizations are entirely funded by individuals. Every member has a voice in choosing the direction for both MoveOn.org Political Action and MoveOn.org Civic Action. Using our Action Forum software, you can propose priorities and strategies. Both organizations also take the initiative to organize quick action on other timely issues that our members care about.[20]

MoveOn has been successful in creating a network of citizens and addressing so many diverse issues and organizing quick action because it focuses so much of its activity in the online sphere.   Helen S., a MoveOn member for Arizona, is quoted as saying, "I used to think my signature or call didn't matter. But then I got an email from MoveOn and I learned I can make a difference. MoveOn makes democracy work (MoveOn.org Political Action report, p.1)."[21] The focus of this study will be the emails that MoveOn sends to its members.

Method

A total of 27 emails received from MoveOn beginning in October 2007 to mid-January 2008 were analyzed. The research question being asked was: How did these emails express collective identity? This study relied on the conceptual categories for social movement identities used by Wall.[22] Each email was analyzed for the ways in which it created frames, drew boundaries and established emotional investments. Since movement frames are a part of the process of creating a consciousness or a way of viewing movement issues, the emails were examined to see if they contained substantive information about the issues that suggested members should adopt a particular view. The emails were also examined to see if they attempted to establish boundaries as to who was or was not part of the movement. This would be found in discussions of who "we" are or are not, what the movement stands for or against, etc. Finally, the emails were examined to see if they encouraged emotional investment on the part of subscribers. That is, did they encourage personal connections with the movement and its members? It should be noted that not every email necessarily would express collective identity.[23]

In examining the expression of collective identity in these emails, this study looked at the general modes of communication in these emails by MoveOn.   As previously noted, Denning identified the following five general modes of internet communication by social movement activists, collection of information; publication of information, dialogue, coordinating action and lobbying decision-makers.[24] Each email was examined to determine what its major objective was. In addressing this question, the goal is to create a better understanding of how MoveOn has used these emails as tools to create collective identity.

Five General Modes of Email Communication

Before discussing the five general modes, a brief description of the emails in the sample would be beneficial. Many of the emails received can be categorized by theme. For example, five of the emails focused on the general theme of war, Iran and Iraq and the general belief that President Bush had lied. Four emails were devoted to the issue of wiretapping. Four emails were also devoted to the 2008 election and issues like getting voters registered. The child healthcare issue also had four emails devoted to it. Two emails addressed thanking our troops. Four of the emails didn't address an issue, but rather were related to housekeeping within the organization itself. Two of these emails asked for members to vote on an advertisement and a video about the group. The other two asked for information from the membership. The remaining four emails centered on issues, but didn't have a common theme. The issues they addressed included pollution credits, the Wall St. tax rate, media ownership and support for Donna Edwards. Not all of these will be discussed in detail in this paper. However, select representative emails will be described in greater detail as the modes of internet communication are discussed and the creation of collective identity is examined.

Of the five general modes of internet communication by social movement activists identified by Denning, the publication of information and the coordination of action dominated the emails that were sent. Eighty-nine percent of the emails in this study published information. Additionally, this information could be easily validated because the sources were cited at the end of each email and often included links directly to the sources. For example, the email received December 12, 2007 with the subject line, "The cartoon Bush doesn't want you to see," claimed that Bush waged war for political gain. The email provides information about how Bush responded to the news that Iran had stopped its nuclear program. It claims that despite the report that "Iran stopped developing nuclear weapons years ago, President Bush and his proxies are still out stumping for war." The email cites Reuters, the Associated Press, Time and National Review when it states, "Defense Secretary Robert Gates said, 'Iran seeks to create chaos' everywhere they go. And leading neocon and Giuliani adviser, Norman Podheretz, has even accused the intelligence community of lying in its report. It's an old political trick, and one that got us mired in war in Iraq. Back in 2002, Karl Rove advised Republican candidates to use the fear of war to win their campaigns. And right-wing commentators openly brag about how Bush used the war to win the election in '04." This email provides information to expose the President's lies and his political motivation behind them.

Eighty-nine percent of the emails also attempted to coordinate action ranging from on-line activity such as

voting on a video, signing a petition or making a donation to off-line activity like physically attending a rally. The coordination of off-line activity was limited to only two emails that addressed child healthcare that focused on coordinating attendance at a rally in Rochester, N.Y. The rest of the emails where concerned with on-line activity with most of those emails either asking for donations from the members or signatures on petitions. Each of these activities could be done by simply clicking on a button within the email. For example, the November 6, 2007 email with the subject line, "The biggest, baddest plan we could dream up," asked for a $15 a month donation until the election to support the group's election efforts. The email states, "We've spent the last four years learning how to turn MoveOn members' energy into votes. Since Sunday, MoveOn members have committed over $600,000 for our biggest election program ever, based on the tried-and-tested techniques we've learned. If we can make it to a million dollars, we can get started right away. Can you chip in $15 a month, now through the election? Contribute Now." The member simply has to click on the "Contribute Now" button to make a donation.

This coordination of action is one of the major advantages of using the internet and email. As Denning points out, it is cheaper than phone and fax and faster than physical delivery.25 Furthermore, the constraints of geography and time can be overcome. Unlike traditional mail, email allows a movement like MoveOn to quickly contact its members and coordinate actions in response to issues and events. An example of this is provided by the email received Tuesday, January 8, 2008 with the subject line "Did you see the New York Times Magazine?" The email states that, "This Sunday's cover story in The New York Times Magazine makes plain the threat: The winner of the 2008 presidential election could be decided by flawed, insecure, and hackable electronic voting machines." The email goes on to inform that "Congress is poised to consider a new emergency paper ballots bill next week and that we'll have to convince them to act the right way." The member is asked to sign "this urgent petition asking local, state, and federal officials to require paper ballots for our votes." This email is a good example of the immediacy that email provides. The Times article ran on Sunday and two days later MoveOn was able to coordinate the signing of a petition to be presented to Congress before they vote on a bill the following week. This email is also a good example of an email that combined publishing information and coordinating action to lobby decision makers.

Almost all of the emails combined two or more of the modes. For example, emails contained information that supported the action being coordinated in the email or the request being made to lobby decision makers. Interestingly, only 29% of the emails focused on lobbying decision makers. Most of these emails were like the one previously discussed in that they published information that supported the request to sign a petition that would be sent to Congress. All a member had to do was click a button to add their name to the petition. Another example of this is provided in the email received December 19, 2007 with the subject line, "No more Rupert Murdoch," which addressed the proposed loosening of media ownership rules. This email provides information about how, "The Bush-appointed FCC voted yesterday to loosen media ownership rules so media titans like Rupert Murdoch can swallow up more local news outlets. They did this despite a huge public outcry- when the FCC asked for public comments, 99% opposed media consolidation!" The member is asked to sign a petition urging Congress to reverse the Federal Communications Commission decision allowing more corporate media consolidation.

A couple of the emails requested that members take a more active role in lobbying decision makers by calling their representatives. Another advantage of email is reflected in the ability of MoveOn to track the participation of its members in these activities due to the instantaneous nature of the medium. MoveOn can track how many have signed petitions or donated money as well as how many have pledged to call their representatives. This information can then be compiled and shared with the membership in subsequent emails.

Although the tracking of participation in actions is a benefit of email, only two of the emails that were sent were primarily focused on the collection of information. One email was received December 14, 2007 and asked "How are we doing?" The purpose of this email was to ask the member to take a survey about how the organization was doing. The second email was received January 3, 2008 and asked "Are you on Facebook?" In this email the goal was simply to collect information about which members were on Facebook.

Finally, none of the emails received had the primary goal of dialogue. As Denning describes it, the internet

offers several venues for dialogue and debate on policy issues.<u>26</u> Email provides the opportunity for discussions that are confined to a closed group.   As previously stated the majority of the emails received are focused on publishing information and coordinating action. There is no back and forth dialogue between the members. The attempt to assess how the group is doing is the closest example to having a dialogue, but it is restrained by the members being asked to take a survey.

Having provided a general description of the emails and a discussion of the general modes of internet communication, we will provide a closer examination of the emails to show how these emails have been used to create collective identity.

Collective Identity

Frames

As described by social movement researchers, one of the ways in which collective identities come into being is through the establishment of frames for the issues at hand.<u>27</u> A majority of the emails contained substantive information about an issue that suggested subscribers should adopt a particular view. Emails addressing a wide range of issues including child health care, illegal wiretapping, the war in Iraq and the possible war with Iran each framed these issues a particular way. As previously mentioned, many of the emails provided information about these issues and others by citing various sources, including mainstream news media stories. An example of this is provided by the emails that were sent out regarding the issue of retroactive immunity for phone companies who participated in illegal wiretapping. The subject line of the first email sent on Oct. 11, 2007 was "Stop President Bush's Cover-up". This email cited Newsweek as recently reporting that "the nation's biggest phone companies, working closely with the White House, have mounted a secretive lobbying campaign to get Congress to quickly approve a measure wiping out all private lawsuits against them" for helping the Bush administration illegally wiretap innocent Americans. The email went on to say that, "President Bush weighed in publicly, promising to veto an upcoming bill dealing with our nation's wiretapping policy if it doesn't give corporations retroactive immunity for their lawbreaking. In addition to Newsweek, the email went on to cite the American Civil Liberties Union as summing up the situation as follows:

> Why is the president of the United States trying to get the telecommunications companies off the hook for their illegal activity? He is supposed to be upholding laws, not encouraging companies to break them. Businesses that break the law should be held accountable. We expect these companies to keep our personal information private, and if they break the law, there should be consequences- not a rewrite of the rule book.

The email then goes on to give a little more background about the phone companies working with the Bush administration and the lawsuits that have been filed. The email argues that "these suits could allow facts to surface that the Bush administration has so far refused to give Congress. Retroactive immunity for phone company lawbreaking could prevent the truth from ever coming out. That's why we need lots of members of Congress to oppose the idea of letting these phone companies off the hook for past lawbreaking." Three times in the email the phone number of Congressman Thomas Reynolds is provided and a request is made for the member to call him and tell him you oppose retroactive immunity for phone companies' lawbreaking. This email clearly provides information that frames this issue as one of a cover-up.

A follow-up email to this one on October 23, 2007 again has the subject line of Stop Bush's cover-up. In this email the *Washington Post, New York Times*, ACLU and others are cited as the issue is again framed as that of a cover-up.   In addition to framing this as a cover up, the email also addresses the need to restore the Constitution. In this email the member is asked to sign a petition that states, "Congress must not let the Bush administration or the telecom industry off the hook for breaking the law. Congress must restore the Constitution by requiring warrants to wiretap Americans and ensure that lawbreakers are held accountable." The member is asked to, "help us reach 250,000 signatures on this petition demanding that Congress reject the president's cover-up." Two more emails about this issue were sent out in December when it came time for Congress to vote on a bill that included immunity for lawbreaking phone companies. The Dec. 17th email asked members to call their Senators and ask them to block any bill that included

immunity. The Dec. 18th email reported "Bush loses on illegal wiretapping!" These four emails provide an example of how MoveOn provided information to its members suggesting they adopt the view of this issue as that of an attempt at a cover-up by President Bush.

Boundaries

The emails directly and indirectly addressed the issue of who was or was not part of the movement. This was done in part by using the terms "we" and "members". In its emails MoveOn uses the term "members" to refer to its supporters, but there is no fixed annual membership fee. An email sent December 28, 2007 stated that, "MoveOn is its members. MoveOn's strength, creativity, tenacity- they all come from the millions of us working together all across the country." Most of the emails are addressed to "Dear MoveOn member" but some of them do address the individual member by name. An email sent on December 14, 2007 provides further evidence of the importance of membership. It states:

> MoveOn has grown tremendously over the last several years and none of that growth would have been possible without your energy and support. From the war in Iraq to President Bush's plan to privatize Social Security, we have worked together to make sure that our voices are heard on the issues that matter most. We want to make sure that we're on the same page that you are as we move forward together in future campaigns. Can you take a moment to tell us how you think we are doing? This brief survey is something like a progress report, and is meant to gauge how satisfied you are with the work that we do. It will help us understand where we stand with the people that matter most to us- our members. Your answers will help us plan our future, so we're counting on you to give us the unvarnished truth.

The group also identifies themselves as progressives. In doing so the emails were able to position the group and its members on issues and clearly identify who was or was not part of the group. An email sent on November 20, 2007 addressed the issue of boundaries. It stated, "It's time to tell America what we stand for, not just what we stand against- to explain why progressive solutions are the right ones for the big issues we face at home and abroad... Check out these great new TV ads about what it means to be a progressive. Vote for your favorite, then contribute to get them on the air during the holidays." The email goes on to state that, "If we help define our progressive values now, more people will realize they're progressives, too." This email and the ads it was promoting were intended to define who was part of the group and who may be part of the group without even knowing it. The emphasis is on the commonality of values and beliefs among the group members.

An email sent on December 3, 2007 also emphasizes the commonality of beliefs among group members. It begins by stating, "If you're like us, you've been trying to block out the drumbeats of war coming from the Bush Administration. After all, Iraq is such a mess that it's hard to even imagine the disastrous results if they go through with their plans to attack Iran."   An anti-war theme and an anti-Bush theme runs throughout many of the emails. An email sent January 11, 2008 stated, "They're the problem. Democrats in Congress who vote with President Bush on the war. Who take checks from lobbyists. Who side with corporation instead of voters. It's not enough just to fight Republicans- progressives need to make sure the Democrats we elect are on our side too."   By identifying who is or is not part of the group these emails helped to create boundaries and establish the collective identity of MoveOn members.

Emotional Investment

Emotional investment appears to have been encouraged by the calls for participation in the activities of the group. The emails aimed at getting group members to attend rallies, make calls, sign petitions and donate money. The degree of emotional investment in the emails varied depending on the issue. Emotional investment seemed to be especially important in the emails about Children's health care. On October 3, 2007, members were notified that "President Bush just vetoed health care for children. In only his fourth veto ever, he blocked health care coverage for millions of uninsured- and mostly poor-kids... Bush is totally out of step with public opinion- even 61% of Republicans support the children's health care bill. We need just 15 more Republicans in Congress to break with Bush to override the veto." Members were then asked

"put the pressure on at our emergency "Rally for Our Children's Health Care" in Rochester." The member could RSVP by clicking a link. The next day a follow up email came from the member hosting the rally asking the member to attend the rally. The email also included a photo of the host member holding her baby and a sign that read, "Healthcare for all."

On October 17, 2007 another email about this issue was sent. In this email, the member was introduced to "Bethany, a 2-year-old girl born with a heart defect who's only healthy today because of the SCHIP children's health program." In this email the member is not asked to attend a rally, but instead to donate money to help run an ad featuring Bethany "in the districts of representatives who vote wrong." In addition to donating money some of the emails would occasionally ask members to phone politicians and then report that they had made the call. This was the case with an email sent on Oct. 25, 2007, the day of the vote on a new version of the children's health care bill. The majority of the emails in this study rarely asked members to participate in real-world group activities, but instead encouraged members to sign petitions or donate money by clicking a button.

Many emails requested monetary donations, but one that stood out in terms of emotional investment involved thanking the troops. On December 20, 2007, a request went out to members to donate $15 so phone cards could be bought for our troops. The email read

> This winter, thousands of U.S. servicemen and women are spending the holidays far away from their families, and calling home can cost them a large part of their paycheck. Troops stationed in Iraq, Afghanistan, and around the globe actually have to pay for phone calls to the U.S.- many of them just don't have a lot of money to spare. Imagine being stuck in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Korea and being unable to afford a call to your spouse of kids on Christmas or New Year's eve. That's why we're helping the USO to provide thousands of phone cards to troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world to let them call their friends, family and loved ones this holiday season. These phone cards don't cost a lot- only $15 each, but they are incredibly valuable, providing 45 minutes of talk-time and holiday wishes for service members... MoveOn members are committed to seeing our troops come home as quickly as possible, and we'll keep working to make that happen. But right now, supporting the USO is a simple way to make a genuine difference in the lives of brave men and women who've sacrificed a lot for our country.

The following day an email with the subject heading "Thank you" was sent out. It reported that in less than 24 hours, "MoveOn members like you have given over $250,000 to help our troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world call home...This is just a reminder of the amazing things this good-hearted community can do when we all work together." This email exemplifies the collective identity that MoveOn has created.

Conclusion

This analysis suggests that the social movement MoveOn has been successful in using email as a means of establishing and maintaining a collective identity for the group. The issues that MoveOn chooses to address are carefully framed in the emails that are sent to the members. This is done in part by the sources for information that are cited. The emails also serve as a means of establishing boundaries and identifying who is or is not in the group. Some emails specifically addressed this issue by trying to define who the group was. Other emails indirectly established the boundaries while in the process of framing the issues. Finally, there were emails that emphasized an emotional investment or connection. Not all of the emails addressed all of these areas, but as a whole the emails that MoveOn sends to its members over the period of this study do establish and maintain a collective identity.

Through the analysis of the use of email be MoveOn to create a collective identity we have made clear the more general communication uses. The primary purpose of many of these emails appears to have been the dissemination of information in an effort to coordinate action. In the case of children's health care, email was used as a means of coordinating an emergency rally. As has been discussed, additional action included donating money, making phone calls and signing petitions. The ultimate goal in cases such as the illegal

wiretapping and children's health care was to lobby decision-makers. MoveOn also used email to survey their members and therefore collect information. Overall, it could be argued that email has been an effective tool for MoveOn in its efforts to educate, mobilize and organize its members.

Monica Brasted is an associate professor at SUNY College at Brockport. New York. This article is based on a paper given at the 2008 ECA Convention.

Notes for *"Using Email to Create Collective Identity"*

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