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Ashley Perry

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The Internet:

A Cure for Political and

Social Fragmentation

Ashley Perry

University of Alabama in Huntsville

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Diploma

Dr. Christopher A. Paul

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Name of candidate: Ashley Perry

Department: Communication Arts / Political Science

Degree: 

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Approved by:

[Signatures and dates]

Project Advisor
Date

Department Chair
Date

Honors Program Director for Honors Council
Date
Abstract

Recently, the United States has experienced a decrease in political and social activism. As a result, many are using the internet to form communities and participate in society. This research, using Pauwel's hybrid-media analysis, qualitatively analyzes three websites, Meetup.com, Townhall.com, and Moveon.org, to discover how websites are facilitating online communities and how they promote activism.
Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types – religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute...Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.
(Tocqueville, 1835)

Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out the associative tendencies of Americans almost 200 years ago. American citizens have been among the most active in all the world, participating in community, social, and political organizations. However, times are changing. The United States has seen a rapid decrease in civic and political participation over the last 30 years (Putnam, 2000). Citizens are not voting, writing letters to representatives, joining committees, campaigning, contributing, or otherwise taking part in the general acts of community involvement.

Although social, cultural, and political participation has declined, citizens have sought personal connections through online communities. Virtual communities have grown, reaching across multiple social classes and cultures. Online communities, including dating services, parenting communities, online gaming groups, religious centers, and youth organizations, are rapidly growing in popularity. The issue of online communities has also entered the political realm.

The 2004 Presidential election was, so far, the most affected by the growth of online communities. Howard Dean, in his 2004 Democratic Presidential primary race,
led one of the most successful internet campaigns to date. Through his use of technology, Dean promoted online communities to bolster grassroots campaigns, raising the most money of any Democratic candidate in history (over $7 million before the primary alone). Although Dean did not win, his use of the internet helped him to become a serious political player on the national level (Wolf). Howard Dean and his online campaign promoted political activism. Dean says,

“...A lot of the people on the net have given up on traditional politics precisely because it was about television and the ballot box, and they had no way to shout back. What we've given people is a way to shout back, and we listen – they don’t even have to shout anymore.” (Wolf)

Citizens set a precedent of using online communities to participate in the political process.

While attending the University of Alabama in Huntsville during the 2004 elections, I turned to the internet to participate, as well. I searched online for groups, public opinion, and information concerning the election. At the time, there were no political organizations set up on campus and no outlet for students on campus to collectively participate in the campaign. In October of 2004, while searching the internet, I found a call to all chapters of the Alabama College Democrats to travel to Florida as a group to campaign for John Kerry in areas that would greatly affect the outcome in Florida, an important swing state in the election. News of this event had not filtered through the offline world to Huntsville and there was no evidence of any other participation from the Huntsville area. I contacted the available sponsor for this trip to enroll myself and a friend. We packed our bags and went to Florida with a busload of
other students to campaign for Kerry. The internet connected me to both an online and offline community. It granted me access and enabled me to get involved in the political process.

My story is just one example of the power the internet has to overhaul American politics. Many are now turning to the internet to seek communities. The internet has the capability to draw people into communities and motivate action among individuals within the communities. It is important to understand how this new technology is changing society. This study will research how the internet is able to create communities and promote activism.

Declining Social Participation

America is currently undergoing a social and cultural fragmentation that is motivating citizens to move away from community involvement. Citizens are becoming more isolated from society. According to Putnam (2000), the total number of voluntary associations over the last 30 years has tripled, while average membership is roughly one-tenth as large (49). These newly formed groups no longer maintain a focus on their members. Many do not even have individual members. They simply base their headquarters in Washington D.C. and focus only on expressing public policy views rather than engaging the public (Putnam, 2000, 51). This is what Wuthnow (1998) refers to as “loose connections.” He claims that Americans are still associated with groups; however, the citizens’ ties to these groups are now “loose”: Americans are not loyal to
their groups, often do not follow group decisions, and have a much lower level of commitment to these groups. Therefore, associative tendencies and civic involvement have rapidly decreased, even though the actual number of associative ties might not have shown such a decline (Wuthnow, 1998). Putnam (2000) warns that it is hazardous to assume trends will continue; however, if this 25 year trend persists for 20 more years, genuine civic organizations in America will become extinct (62).

This movement exists not only in civic involvement but in recent political involvement, as well. Voting is one of the easiest and most common forms of political activism and embodies the democratic principles the United States was founded upon. Voting percentages have reached their lowest levels in over 200 years (Putnam, 2000, 33). Citizens are retreating from the political community.

This is occurring at a particularly interesting time in history. The 1960s and 1970s were filled with activism as young students took to the streets to hold anti-Vietnam war protests and minorities fought for their civil rights. It seemed as though there was "an excess of democracy" (Reed, 2001, 444). Legislation, like the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the 26th Amendment, and Mover Voter, made participation in the political process even easier. Even though more people than ever are afforded these freedoms and liberties, fewer people are taking advantage of these democratic opportunities (Reed, 2001).

Putnam (2000) identifies this decrease in participation as an "intercohort" social change, meaning this change is occurring only in different age groups, rather than across society as a whole (34).

Throughout their lives and whatever their station in life and their level of political
interest, baby boomers and their children have been less likely to vote than their parents and grandparents. As boomers and their children became a larger and larger fraction of the national electorate, the average turnout rate was inexorably driven downward. (Putnam, 2000, 34)

Patterns are showing that older citizens are more likely to be informed and active within the political system than younger ones. The change occurring today shows that individuals are not changing, but rather births and deaths are changing the makeup of society. Only a dramatic change in the process is likely to reverse this decline.

**Online Communities**

The internet is gradually becoming a haven for citizens in need of information, communication, and even community support. 72% of adults now have access to and use the internet regularly ("Demographics," 2005). 52% of American citizens report using their email daily for business and personal communication and an overwhelming 30% now turn to the internet for their daily news ("Daily," 2005).

With the growing popularity of the internet, politically and socially active citizens are beginning to use online communities as gathering places. Many researchers point to the negative side effects this movement may have on society. One downfall of online communities that Joseph Lockard points out is the unequal access to them. Access to the internet is not democratic in Lockard's eyes, but rather extremely limited, requiring significant disposable income to participate. Access can be gained through proper technical hardware, efficient services, and adequate user ability. Lacking any of these
may prevent a user from full participation in online communities (Etzioni). This gap in access, known as the digital divide, seems to be decreasing (Katz). However, it will continue to limit online access. Lockard states, “cyberspace may be ethereal, but it will never be as cheap as air” (Lockard).

A new form of digital divide is now beginning to arise. Access speeds can play a formidable role in what users can or cannot access online. Those with slower connections may not be able to access the same information as people who can afford better processors or higher speed internet connections. Currently, 39% of Americans still use dial-up connections while 59% use high speed connections (“Demographics”). However, this gap, too, is decreasing every year as technology becomes less and less expensive.

Lockard, among others, is also troubled by the “group” aspect of online communities. While online, users are alone even among electronic crowds. This feeds individualism and fragmentation rather than celebrating a group mentality, impeding social cooperation both on and offline (Lockard, 2000). He views the attempt of citizens to develop a “virtual community” out of the socially isolating internet as merely the human need for community, not the power of the internet. Lockard favors real-world, face-to-face communication over what he calls “mythical” online communities (Lockard, 1997, 230).

However, many researchers view online communities as a positive new form of communication. Howard Rheingold (2000) termed the phrase “virtual community” and praised its possibilities. He actually participated in these communities himself and felt deeply attached to his fellow community members. He describes participation in these
Communities as a place where people:

use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. (Rheingold, 2000)

Online communities offer a variety of advantages over real world communities.

Online communities disregard geographic distance, opening access and information to all users (Rheingold). Online communities allow more people over a broad geographic area to participate in their activities. For example, a person may not be geographically located to others with similar political views or social interests. Online communities provide a way for geographically isolated individuals to come together and form communities, promoting the spread of information and activism. Virtual communities enhance access for citizens left out of real world social and political spheres.

The anonymity available through online communities also promotes activism. Participating in a community that disregards physical characteristics and social constraints can be a refreshing and egalitarian experience, leading participants to reveal information more freely. Participants often feel more accepted in online communities. Computer-supported social networks on average, will overwhelmingly accept strangers at a much greater rate than they would be accepted into offline communities (Wellman). Some researchers criticize this anonymity within communities, fearing it may fragment society since members do not really know the identity of one another. Some users may not feel comfortable participating in the online environment with strangers. There are
disadvantages that come with online anonymity. However, many feel that, for political
and social activism on the Web, the anonymity is an improvement because it helps to
level the playing field (Pauwels).

Historically, information has been distributed through narrow-casting, delivering
information to only one person at a time (e.g. door to door campaigning). Mass media
began a revolution of broadcasting that has been magnified through the rapid growth of
the internet (Etzioni, 1999). Broadcasting sends messages and information that reach
many people simultaneously. Communities can now send emails to every member of the
group instantaneously and post information on the internet for the whole world to see.
This new technology gives communities the opportunity to reach out to those who would
not otherwise be exposed to them. Therefore, broadcasting helps draw more citizens into
communities and engage them in political and social activities. It also gives groups the
power to better inform members or raise awareness to particular issues of concern
through the dispersal of information. This increases the rate of communication, sustains
bonds between members, and helps cultivate stronger communities online (Wellman).

Political Side Effects

The appearance and growth of online communities has the power to affect the
American political system by reversing current trends in political apathy. The American
political system is based on democracy, yet many citizens feel shut out of the political
system, like they do not have a voice. People do not participate because they feel it will
not make a difference. The internet is a democratizing power that can give citizens back their voice through online communities. Nederman, Jones, and Fitzgerald (1998) determined that technology can be used to resolve problems that may exist in large cultures in which citizens may be cut off from, apathetic to, or suspicious of the political process. Democracy is an intrinsic value of computer-mediated communication, primarily because of its scale and discursiveness. The internet eliminates geographical limitations and allows a greater range of citizens to participate in political activities. The discursive nature of the internet better enables the flow of information and ideas. Online communication can resemble a sort of ongoing asynchronous town hall meeting. The study found that technology is not the only or the final solution to better creating a traditional democracy, but rather one means to open more opportunities for democracy in the public sphere. The internet and other new forms of technology do facilitate a more open discourse on public and political processes (Nederman et al, 1998).

Morris’s study (2003) emphasizes the importance of citizens in political participation. Technology can bring politics from a monologue, in which communication only flows down from the top government levels, to a dialogue or even “pluro-logue,” in which citizens have the ability to speak back to the government, creating an interactive political system (Morris, 2003, 17). For example, citizens can easily email representatives with any questions, requests, or complaints they may have. Often, representatives email citizens back to let them know they received the message and what they will be doing to remedy the situation. Citizens are able to actually act and see the response. This ability allows citizens to participate and encourages them to reclaim their voice in the political
The internet is developing into a potential answer to the ongoing political and cultural fragmentation in the United States. Given the relatively democratic nature of the internet and the rising use of technology, the internet will impact the American political system. Most previous studies in this field have performed quantitative analyses of the relationship between online communities and political activism. This study will analyze popular social and political websites to determine how the technology in place can facilitate online communities and political activism.

Methodology

A Brief History of Website Analysis

This study will qualitatively analyze online community websites to monitor how technology is establishing these virtual communities and how this can translate into increased levels of political and social activism. To do so, I will apply Pauwels’ ‘hybrid media analysis’ to Web sites, focusing on aspects of community, participation, and activism (2005). However, it is important to first understand the unique characteristics of website analysis.

Upon the birth of Web analysis, many researchers simply transferred existing methods used for offline communication research, such as content and textual analysis, to the Web (Mann and Stewart, 2000). However, by applying these methods, researchers
were over looking very integral aspects of the Web that could not be studied through traditional means. With growing technology, many of the very unique and basic features of the Web were being neglected. For example, while the ‘verbal utterances,’ or text, was studied, the multimedia features were often disregarded (Pauwels, 2005).

This precisely ignores the importance of the other predominant visual features unique to Web sites, including layout, color schemes, site design, multimedia, and graphics, which can all contribute greatly to an “impact on most of our senses” (Mann and Stewart, 2000, 97). By studying textual, verbal, and other visual cues, Web site analysis has the potential to provide more information to researchers than a textual analysis alone could provide.

To remedy the problems he saw in website analysis, Pauwels developed a ‘hybrid media analysis’ in which he focused on culturally decoding websites. He states,

The crucial point for the cultural researcher is...to develop an approach that focuses on how the numerous potentially significant features of a website can be decoded as expressions of culture, thus offering unique insights into values, norms, opinions, expectations and aspirations of groups of people. (Pauwels, 2005, 609).

His ideas have helped to transform standard textual and content analysis into an in depth method by which to study complex, hybrid, interactive web sites.

**Hybrid Internal Analysis of Website**

Pauwels created a seven point internal analysis of websites in order to point out the hybrid media qualities and reveal the cultural statement of a site. His divisions are as follows:
1. Inventory of topics and issues (including significantly absent items)
2. Point of view analysis (who's talking?)
3. Analysis of intended audience(s): derived goals and purposes
4. Structural analysis: hierarchy and flow of elements
5. Analysis of imagery: pre-photographic and photographic parameters
6. Design and typography: symbolic and metaphorical meaning
7. Links to other sources (expressions or affiliations)

(Pauwels, 2005, 612).

This study will use the seven points listed above to analyze three websites: MeetUp.Com, TownHall.Com, and MoveOn.Org. These three leading online community sites have been strategically chosen in order to examine communities among varying groups of people, whether they be conservative, liberal, or neutral.

MeetUp.Com was launched in 2002 and now has over 2 million users with almost 9,500 meet up groups (MeetUp.Com). The site helps people from across the country meet like minded individuals with similar interests and “meet up.” There are a wide variety of interests represented in Meet Up groups, including groups for breastfeeding mothers, witches, church groups, political groups of all types, sports fans, pet lovers, etc. MeetUp.Com became nationally renowned when it was used by Howard Dean supporters in the 2005 Democratic presidential primary race. Now, millions of people are involved and it is being heralded as one of the top sites to visit for online community involvement.

TownHall.Com is conservative online community that brings Americans with similar ideas together. The site provides information for voters, news updates, opinion articles, and ways to contribute to the conservative ideals expressed on the site. It began in 1991 as a private online bulletin board with roughly 700 members (TownHall.Com). In
1995, TownHall moved to the World Wide Web and became the first major site for online activism by either side. It has now been in existence for over 10 years and has become the premier site for Republicans to express their opinions and congregate online.

MoveOn.Org is a liberal online community. The online group formed in 1998 after an online petition spurred hundreds of thousands of citizens to action against the impeachment of President Clinton. It now has over 3.3 million members across America (MoveOn.Org). MoveOn is made up of two components: MoveOn.Org Political Action and MoveOn.Org Civic Action. The community has been a powerful force on the American political system, bringing the public closer than ever to government.

Each of these sites will be studied based on Pauwels' seven point analysis. Using this technique, I will focus primarily on how each aspect of the site affects community building and involvement and activism among members. I will look at particular features that emphasize or suggest community involvement or activism in any way. This study will review the site as a whole and then focus intensively on areas of the site that involve community building and/or substantiation or activism among site users.

MeetUp.Com, TownHall.Com, and MoveOn.Org are all different; however, they are each active online communities that seek to make a difference in some manner. By applying Pauwels' hybrid internal analysis of websites and focusing on community, involvement, and activism, to each site, this study will discover through qualitative analysis how technology is supporting virtual communities and aiding in an increase of social and political activism.
Findings

Meetup.com

The main focus of Meetup.com is building community. This is obvious upon first glance at the home page. The Meetup.com logo, a name tag sticker bearing the site name, is placed at the top left of the page, the most dominant spot on a website. The page bears the headline, “Over 2 million people are part of a revolution in local community!” Underneath, pictures display meetup group gatherings from dog lovers to poker players. The site beckons readers in, giving them the opportunity to search through interests or enter their zip code to find local meetups. Featured and popular meetup interests are listed along with a list of top meetup cities for direct access into these groups. The home page also boasts quotes from national publications. For example, Time Magazine calls Meetup.com “a convenient, non-threatening way to connect to other people who share similar interests and live nearby.” On the home page, users may also sign into their account or register with Meetup.com.

Registration for Meetup.com is simple. Users need only enter their name, email address, and zip code. Users are encouraged to use their first name instead of a nickname when registering, although nothing is required.

For new members, Meetup.com offers a tour of the site. It opens by explaining “what is a meetup group?” The group emphasizes in bold typeface that members of a meetup group “share a cause or interest” and “meet regularly face-to-face.” This page
claims that, in the last two years, Meetup.com has “brought communities together, shaken up politics, given people a voice, and had a lot of fun.” Again, a picture of another meetup group is shown.

The next page of the virtual tour answers the question, “what happens at a meetup?” Again, the site emphasizes in bold that the meetings are informal “real world” and “face-to-face” gatherings and almost always open to anyone. Three main purposes are also emphasized: “activities,” “organizing for a cause,” and “swap information and stories.” An image on this page shows a group meeting, as well.

The site tells users how to find a meetup group, how to sign up for groups, and then what to do once users have signed up for a group. The site suggests, “meetup groups are all about building communities and getting to know new people. So introduce yourself!” In bold typeface, the site suggests new users set up their profile, say hello on a message board or contact organizer, and explore upcoming events. If there are no groups, users can add suggested topics for future groups, sign up to be notified of new groups within the area, or start a new meetup group. It then goes through how to start a meetup group (however, it fails to mention the new charges required to start and maintain a meetup group).

The final slide of the site tour urges, “Be part of something bigger!” It claims that meetup groups are “bringing communities to life” and again mentions the “real life” and “face-to-face” traits of these groups. In bold, the site emphasizes that Meetup.com is a “powerful force for change.” This page holds a motto for Meetup.com members: “Do something. Share something. Learn Something. Change Something.” The tour leaves
users with two options, to find or start a meetup.

Meetup.com hosts its own message board for members to discuss a wide variety of issues. It is made up of six rooms: help and technical assistance, suggestions to make groups better, success stories of meetup groups, about Meetup.com and the message board, a forum page for organizers, and an off topic room.

The About Meetup.com page explains the goals and vision for the organization and introduces Meetup.com staff members, known at “the team”. This page begins by claiming “Meetup.com helps people find others.” It lists accomplishments of the site:

Meetup Groups help people:

1. Find others who share their interests
2. Get involved locally
3. Learn, teach, and share things
4. Make friends and have fun
5. Rise up, stand up, unite, and make a difference
6. Be a part of something bigger – both locally and globally
7. The site then boasts “we’re proud to give more power to the people."

The primary goal of Meetup.com is to bring citizens together and foster activism among members.

Townhall.com

The first noticeable object on the homepage at townhall.com is the large banner ad
at the top of the page. This is an outside ad but ties in heavily with the conservative theme of the site. The ad pronounces “Getting America Right. Join the Conservative Revolution Now.” This is advertising the latest *New York Times* best seller written by two of the Townhall.com founders.

The logo for Townhall.com is directly under this ad aligned to the left side of the screen. The phrase “News. Opinion. Action.” appears below the logo. To the right, a search option is available along with a drop down menu of issues. This issue tab lists 16 issues on everything from social security to immigration; nine of these issue pages have suggested actions members can take to advance conservative ideals. Directly under the logo, navigation is separated into the three core areas: news, opinion, and action.

The news portion of this site provides users with reports on latest events, archived information, news separated based on issue for easy navigation, and reports straight from the Congressional floor.

The opinion section hosts recent articles written by conservatives. This page also contains “Point. Counterpoint.,” two articles between opposing sides on an issue within the conservative community. A list of top articles outside Townhall.com is also provided. This list is generated from recommendations made by readers of Townhall.com. Each week, Townhall.com hosts a new poll in which users may participate. Results of past polls are also available so that users can see how the conservative community feels on past issues. The “Townhall C-Log” (conservative web log), written by several top conservative leaders, is available through the opinion section of the site. Recommended books, videos, and radio shows are also provided for users of Townhall.com.
Finally, the action section of Townhall.com provides ways in which members may get involved. The top campaign of Townhall.com is highlighted on the opening page of this section. Highlighted at the top of the page, the article urges users to "Call Your Senators: Defend the Grassroots!" A list of other priorities for the site along with a calendar of upcoming lectures, conferences, debates, etc. is also on this page. The site lists 15 total ongoing campaigns. Of these, 14 encourage readers to call Congress or other representatives and one offers an opportunity for members to write thank you letters to soldiers.

The action page also provides a place to write both the media and elected officials. Users can send emails through the site to up to five media outlets at one time. The site lists local newspapers, television stations, and radio stations. Users simply click on the button to send their message to whichever outlets they wish to contact. Contacting elected officials works in a similar manner. Users type in their zip code to find out who is representing them at both the state and national level. Information on candidates and their voting history is also available from this page.

Users may also register to vote through Townhall.com. Information on upcoming elections is provided, as well. For example, all candidates from all parties running for a particular office, both on the state and national level, are listed, including information and previous voting records (if they were serving in such an office). Key dates for local, state, and national elections are listed once users enter their zip code.

Other features are also available through the action page at Townhall.com. The soapbox is a message board on which members of Townhall.com may post messages and
respond to one another. Also, a section entitled “Get the Right Job” lists fellowship, internship, and job opportunities within conservative companies.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of the action section is Townsquare, an organizational tool modeled after Meetup.com. Townsquare is hailed as “a simple way to connect conservatives worldwide.” The goal of this venture is to “develop a solid foundation to build a large, strong, and interconnected conservative force.” Members can search by location and join or start a Townsquare group in their geographic location.

The mission statement for the Townsquare community includes informing and bringing together conservatives in order to promote discussion of issues within the party and lead grassroots movements across the country. The long term objectives of Townsquare follow this mission. It includes phrases such as “empower average Americans,” “support conservative activists,” “establish a deep network of conservatives,” and “influence lawmakers.”

Individual chapters are also provided a mission statement, objectives, and tools by Townsquare. The mission statement claims to seek conservative principles through “political activism, public education, and community outreach.” The objectives claim, “now is the time to lay the foundation.” Chapters are given seven short-term objectives in order to begin the conservative grassroots movement (http://www.townhall.com/action/townsquare/content/mission_statement.html).

The site provides a guarantee, similar to the Bill of Rights on Meetup.com. In this, Townsquare guarantees a commitment to conservative values, the right to privacy, and the right to meet, claiming that meetings are “open to anyone willing to be open to
conservative ideas and/or pursue conservative values.”

Townsquare claims two core values. The first focuses on conservative values. The second focuses on community: “Citizens should be informed and active. They should understand their freedom and educate fellow citizens about what it means to be an American.”

Townsquare provides individual chapters with downloadable agenda and issue statements for meetings. The site also features “How To’s” on everything from making meetings more efficient to writing professional press releases to running petition drives.

Townhall.com describes itself as “the first truly interactive community on the Internet to bring internet users, conservative public policy organizations, congressional staff, and political activists together under the broad umbrella of ‘conservative’ thoughts, ideas and actions.” Townhall.com uses the internet to act as a “one-stop mall of ideas” where citizens can be informed, discuss issues, and participate in the conservative movement.

**Moveon.org**

When first visiting the Moveon.org home page, the most dominant feature of the page is the large banner advertisement of Moveon.org’s latest ad campaign. The ad calls for contribution by stating, “Contribute to the Big Plan: New TV Ad Best Yet.” Visitors can view the ad or read transcripts or press releases concerning the ad. The Moveon.org logo sits just above this with the phrase “democracy in action” along with the navigation
bar to the right.

Under the advertisement, Moveon.org highlights the top three campaigns. Under each article, the site provides users with some way to participate, whether it be to sign a petition or write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper. Next, two Moveon.org success stories are highlighted. Each of these article headlines is emphasized with a picture or image that in some way relates to the message within the article.

Along the right hand side of the page, users are encouraged to sign up for a mailing list by simply entering their email address. The registration box claims “get instant action updates and make a difference.” Underneath this the site offers an opportunity for users to donate. Then, there is a link to the ActionForum where members can “help set the agenda.”

The navigation bar takes users to “Campaigns,” “Success Stories,” “Donate,” “Sign Up,” or “About.”

The campaigns page lists 15 issues Moveon.org is battling. All of these campaigns offer some type of action in which users may participate. Out of 15 issues, 10 encourage users to sign petitions, two tell users to call their representatives, two ask for donations, and one urges users to vote.

Participation through Moveon.org is kept primarily on the site. In order to sign a petition through Moveon.org, users simply enter their name and email and mailing address into a form. Moveon.org then sends the petitions out to whomever they may concern. Letters to representatives are provided through Moveon.org. Members simply copy and paste the letter, fill in the appropriate name, add information if they like, and
send it to their representative. The site also provides talking points for writing letters to
the editors of papers. Users can send letters to local area newspapers by simply clicking
on the button of a publication of choice. Donating is simple as well. Users simply click
the button of an amount or enter their own amount into the form. Donors only have to
enter their name, address, and credit card information. Users may also tell others about
the site simply by entering their email address into the appropriate form. A letter is sent
to inform them on an issue and encourage them to participate in some way.

Moveon.org has recently implemented a feature called ActionForum into the site.
ActionForum is much like a message board in that members post messages and
comments to a board concerning a particular issue. However, each comment can be
rated as “agree” or “disagree” by other members and then rated on an importance of the
comments from one to five stars. The forum is arranged by members’ preferences, rather
than chronologically. Therefore, “the good drives out the bad,” automatically filtering
out any comments deemed inappropriate or irrelevant based on ratings from members.
In this manner, ActionForum claims to “foster collaborative problem solving.”

The page concerning Moveon.org and its history begins by calling itself a “family
of organizations” that “brings real Americans back into the political process.”
Moveon.org identifies itself as a place where Americans of all classes, races, and
occupations can come to experience the progressive movement. Moveon.org is a
self-described service that provides “a way for busy but concerned citizens to find their
political voice.”

There are two divisions of Moveon.org: Civic Action and Political Action.
Moveon.org Civic Action focuses on education and advocacy of issues, while
Moveon.org Political Action focuses on assembling people to fight for these progressive
issues in Congress and to help get the candidates who share the values of Moveon.org
and its members elected.

**Discussion**

The development of community is a key aspect of all three sites. Meetup.com
brings individual citizens to one site to meet others located near them with similar
interests. Because citizens have become less socially and politically active, two people
could quite possibly live right next door to each other without realizing their common
interests. Meetup.com, ironically, is using the internet to bring people out of their homes
to join face-to-face groups.

The language and images of this site echo this goal of building communities.
Even the name “Meetup” encourages participation in community. The logo resembles a
name tag, bearing the site’s name. This logo implies that users should be out meeting
new people. Users are first urged to introduce themselves on their meetup’s message
board. There is even an “Introduce Yourself” discussion category on the main message
board with over 500 posts and viewed over 44,000 times. Meeting new people, whether it
be on an international message board or in your local coffee shop, is encouraged.

There are two forms of communities on Meetup.com: the local meetup groups
established by the site and the community developing on the message board. The
message board community is made up of user from around the world. Some users of the
message board have thousands of posts. Members have rank names assigned by the number of posts they have made, from a very nonpersonal 10 digit identification number to the title "savviest" member. These members interact with one another as friends, even if they have never met face-to-face. Meetup.com member profiles even offer a place to identify your "favorite people" on Meetup.com. With a new charge set in place to form and maintain Meetup.com groups, members of the message board are even discussing where they can all move their meetup groups online to still be connected to one another. There is a strong overall community on Meetup.com message boards that exists without the face-to-face contact of the meetup groups themselves.

Photos throughout the site, on the home page, and on Meetup.com group profiles all portray community. A group of mothers holding babies and pushing strollers represents the Palm Beach Mom Meetup; a group of college students sitting around a poker table drinking beer represents the UT Poker Meetup; while a large group of people playing with their dogs in the snow represents the Toronto French Bulldog Meetup. Through these images, the site encourages users to share common interests with neighbors by getting involved in or starting a local meetup. Meetup.com uses images and photos as one way to promote community building and activism on the site.

Meetup.com registration encourages new members to use their first name. The site wants to establish real world connections between its members and groups. Avatars and screen names do not fit into the communities that Meetup.com organizers envision.

This focus on real world communities becomes clearly evident (if not already) in the Meetup.com tour. Almost every page of the tour emphasizes "real world" or
“face-to-face” in bold typeface. There is a definite focus on coming together: “United we Meetup!” By entering a zip code to search through meetups, the site pulls only those communities of interest to users within the given region.

The tour ends with a big headline challenging the user to “be part of something bigger.” The site is self-described as a “powerful force for change.” Finally, the tour ends: “Do something. Share something. Learn something. Change something.” The goal of this site is to bring people together who might not have otherwise met and then send them into their communities to change their areas in some way or provide new opportunities for association. This site is working to reverse the intercohort change within society that Putnam recognized.

Along with poker players and dog lovers, American citizens are beginning to use Meetup.com for political activism. There are thousands of groups concerning political parties, candidates, and special interest groups. These groups are using all of the benefits of Meetup.com to progress their groups’ candidates and ideals within the political system.

Moveon.org hosts a very large and growing political community. There is a call on the home page to be a part of this progressive community: “Join more than 3,000,000 members online!” The site is clearly geared towards activism. The slogan is “democracy in action.” On every page and almost every issue or article, members are encouraged to participate in some way, whether it be through writing a letter or donating money. Members are made to feel like a part of the Moveon.org community because they may only sign a petition or donate $20, but their small contribution is joined with many others
and together it impacts the political system.

In order to foster community, Moveon.org added the ActionForum. This special type of message board is interesting because it enables the community to come together by giving users the ability to rank posts based on importance. Issues that members feel are most important (even if they do not agree on the position) will appear at the top of the board. The community is not broken up by one disruptive member, but rather comes together based on overall consensus on issues. Each member of the community plays an important role in the shape and growth of the forum. Members can look to the top of the board to sense the overall priorities and opinions within the progressive community.

Similarly to Moveon.org, Townhall.com is growing and nurturing a community, as well, referring to itself as “a community of over 1.5 million conservatives.” There is a clear establishment of community on the site. Language on the home page hints at this community, with statements such as “our safety,” “we need a government,” and “we can make a huge difference.” Townhall.com represents the ideals of many conservatives across the country, encompassing many more people than those that are registered users of the site. Members know that Townhall.com is working to deliver conservative legislation for the entire community. Members receive news and articles that keep them informed of pertinent information within the community. The goals of the site are clear from the slogan and the organization of the navigational bar: first to inform users with the news, second to give them conservative opinions on the issues at hand, and third to involve users in action to support the conservative standpoint on these issues.

Townhall.com’s message board, the Soapbox, works to create an interactive
online community within the site. To post on the Soapbox, users must be registered members. A strong community exists on this board. Although there is often disagreement on the boards, many of the discussion are informative, arguing both sides of an issue. By allowing both sides to be expressed and discussed among the members, the conservative community can work to develop a single stance before presenting it to the public, and can then be ready for counterattacks based on some of the feedback within the message board.

Townsquare, the grassroots organization of Townhall.com, connects these individuals of the community and brings them together face-to-face to promote conservative ideals and candidates within local regions of the country. By establishing this grassroots community, members can seek out other participants to help build the conservative community. The groups can then form allies with one another to impact local, state, and national politics. Townhall.com grows and stands out as the broad community under which members of Townsquare work to benefit.

Both Moveon.org and Townhall.com use their established and growing communities to increase political activism and influence public policy. These sites make participation easier by keeping most everything on the site, serving as headquarters for their member' political activity. Members of these communities have more opportunities than others to participate in the political process because they are informed, have easy and clear ways to participate, and have the support of the community. Moveon.org and Townhall.com provide easy ways for their members to participate in the political process through organizing petition drives, setting up direct email forms to representatives and
the media, and offering a secure and simple way to contribute.

Both Moveon.org and Townhall.com offer daily email updates to members. These emails inform citizens of the issues currently being debated, the progress the organization has made to get the interests and ideals of its members passed into legislation, and what else can be done by members to keep advancing this progress. Not only are these organizations serving to inform American citizens, they are also encouraging political participation everyday through a simple email. This reminder is echoing not only to the 3.3 million members of Moveon.org and the 1.5 million members of Townhall.com, but to Americans across the country. The internet is bringing citizens back into politics and creating a more informed public.

People often have strong opinions on issues, but do not know how to get these opinions across to those who can influence the vote. Moveon.org organizes the ideas and gets all these individuals to come together through petition drives. For example, nearly half a million people have signed a petition to support Russ Feingold’s efforts to censure President Bush. These names will be attached to the petition and sent to the Judiciary Committee, who currently has this bill on the table. Pressure from almost 500,000 people cannot simply be ignored. Moveon.org takes one person who is willing to speak out and turns that into a political force that must be acknowledged. The technology and power of the internet are bringing people from across the country to one site in order to participate in the political process. This gathering is bringing the voice of the people back into government.

Both Moveon.org and Townhall.com also allow users to send emails to
representatives and the media through the site. Both sites provide talking points while Moveon.org even provides a template letter members may use to send to representatives concerning key issues. Moveon.org and Townhall.com work hard to gather the most persuasive statistics and facts for users to utilize in letters. Citizens do not have to spend the time finding these facts or worry about the validity of their claims. The internet has not only opened up information to the public; groups like Moveon.com and Townhall.com are gathering the information and delivering it to citizens in a more efficient manner. By allowing users to send this letter through the site, Moveon.org and Townhall.com can see what members are saying about current issues. They can use this information to further advance the views of the members. The organizations can also use this technology to gauge the activism of the members. Having its members conduct their activism through the site gives these organizations authority within the political sphere.

Contributing money to a candidate, issue, or political party is a reputable way to participate in the political process. The internet enables citizens to easily participate through donating money online. However, if citizens are not able to donate a substantial amount of money to the candidate or organization, the money might not ordinarily go towards implementing the views he or she may have on an issue. Nevertheless, sites like Moveon.org enable individual citizens to lump their own small contribution in with those of hundreds of thousands of others who share the same ideals. The contribution, then, is much greater and will receive much more recognition. The average donation made by individuals on Moveon.org is $45, but together over $9 million has been raised to support progressive issues and candidates. Not only is the total amount worth
reckoning with, the fact that it is backed by over 125,000 citizens makes this contribution very powerful. The internet now allows users to easily, safely, and conveniently donate money online. This ability is making politicians pay attention to the people rather than only to big money businesses.

These three Web sites use the internet to build communities. Meetup.com builds a network of communities that encourages more associations and face-to-face gatherings. Townhall.com serves as a source of information, leader of opinion, and organizer of activity within the conservative community. Moveon.org stresses strength in numbers and encourages the rapid growth of the community to establish greater power within the political system. Each of these sites uses technology to build, grow, and sustain community in order to achieve their goals.

**Conclusion**

The technology available to organizations and citizens through the internet is remarkable. The internet is currently developing and opening up the political process. Technologies such as the traditional message boards and the new ActionForum are creating communities online, while the organization and assembly features of the internet are being used to help establish and manage offline communities. Organizations are bringing a variety of different technologies onto one site in order to provide opportunities for users to participate in the political process from one location. Not only do these new technologies provide convenience for citizens, they also allow these
political organizations to gauge member activity. The debate over online versus offline communities will continue. However, this study shows that both can be positively implemented to create more opportunities for citizens.

As technology continues to advance, more and more opportunities will become available for citizens to participate in social and political activism. One of the rising issues regarding technology and the political process is the debate over internet voting. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the thousands of displaced Louisiana citizens, the idea of internet voting is gaining more support. However, many citizens are reluctant to let new technologies become common place within the political realm. Discussions have also formulated regarding direct democracy by citizens through technology. This movement is a long way off but deserves more attention as technology continues to become more a part of our everyday lives.

Technology continues to grow and transform society. Today, we are only at the beginning of the rise of technology. As this advancement continues, both citizens and politicians must find a balance. Online communities and technologies have great power to open up the political system and provide more opportunities for citizens. However, as Howard Dean’s Meetup.com campaign showed in 2004, technology and face-to-face communication can be integrated successfully. The technologies in place now are promoting activism among citizens. Technology offers hope of a rebirth in democracy and activism within America.
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