

# ADVOCACY NETWORKS

How Internet-enabled  
Activism is  
Revolutionizing  
Social Change

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**As the Internet lowers the cost of collaboration, the world is witnessing a dramatic rise in increasingly** powerful Advocacy networks that are more global, more widely distributed and more technologically sophisticated than their 20th century predecessors. Part of a broad investigation of the 10 types of global solution networks identified in the Global Solution Networks taxonomy, this report argues that transnational Advocacy networks play a vital role in identifying, framing and bringing attention to global issues.



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# Prologue

## The Challenge of the Global Solution Networks Taxonomy

The Global Solution Networks research team has done an extensive literature review and initial investigation leading to the development of a comprehensive taxonomy that classifies the new networks being organized to address global problems. These networks are utilizing 21<sup>st</sup> century tools of technology, social connectivity and communication to develop solutions to global, multi-national and multi-cultural problems.<sup>1</sup> Our taxonomy provides useful categories for comparison and discussion but it's important to note that, while the categories are comprehensive, they are not mutually exclusive.

An organization that fits into the defining parameters of one network category may also have characteristics that make it a candidate for classification in other categories in the taxonomy. In addition, networks are dynamic and may change, evolve or adapt to their operating area in ways that may alter the way in which they are catalogued in our discussions. Some of the cases presented in the pages that follow highlight just such multi-type networks. They have been selected here for discussion of Advocacy networks, although several have also appeared in other papers in our collection as being representative of other network characteristics. It is just such overlap and such unique combinations of characteristics that make the study and observation of these networks so compelling and so vital.





## Idea in Brief

As the Internet lowers the cost of collaboration, the world is witnessing a dramatic rise in increasingly powerful Advocacy networks that are more global, more widely distributed and more technologically sophisticated than their 20<sup>th</sup> century predecessors. Part of a series investigating the 10 types of global solution networks identified in the Global Solution Networks taxonomy,<sup>2</sup> this report argues that transnational Advocacy networks play a vital role in identifying, framing and bringing attention to global issues.

Case studies on leading Advocacy networks such as Change.org, Avaaz and 350.org highlight their strategies for success, their interactions with stakeholders, their use of technology and the broader impact of modern advocacy movements on global governance and cooperation. This report also spells out a number of challenges that network leaders must manage if Advocacy networks are to become more effective contributors to solution design and implementation. The speed and intensity by which they mobilize individuals around issues, however, makes Advocacy networks an unpredictable and potentially volatile player in world affairs, with the capacity to confound traditional bureaucracies.

## Advocacy Networks and the New Logic of Collective Action

Political scientists have long taken for granted the notion that if groups share common interests, then group members will tend to work collectively to further their interests. But in his classic work of political theory, *The Logic of Collective Action*, economist Mancur Olson showed that not all groups are equally successful in organizing for social change.<sup>3</sup> Olson's essential insight was that concentrated interest groups have lower information and organization costs than large diffuse ones. As a result, concentrated groups pursuing narrow and selfish interests can gain benefits from the state (favorable regulations or subsidies and tax breaks, for example) that may not be as readily available to more diffuse groups pursuing broader goals, such as economic growth or better education for children. Indeed, Olson's theory of *collective* lies at the heart of many of our contemporary explanations of core political problems, including, for example, why many people don't vote,<sup>4</sup> why some interest groups are politically successful and others are not,<sup>5</sup> why international agreements fail,<sup>6</sup> why industrial cartels are not stable<sup>7</sup> and why unrestricted access to the commons will lead to environmental ruin.<sup>8</sup>

Today, the Internet is helping create balance between special interests and more encompassing interests by reducing the cost of accessing information and organizing on a mass scale. Cost reduction is a particular advantage for

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diffuse groups because reduced costs can temper their significant problems of coordination.

As countless campaigns have demonstrated, the Internet is a powerful medium for spreading information and recruiting and organizing supporters. It promotes affinity among like-minded individuals and groups, allowing them to seek common cause, coordinate actions and share critical information, even when separated by time zones and geography. Social networks like Twitter and Facebook also increase the visibility of social actions, transforming once largely anonymous tasks such as voting or supporting a cause into public expressions and gestures that are easily observable by peer networks. Such networks impose social pressures that were once only possible in face-to-face groups and they do so on a scale that face-to-face groups cannot accomplish. For example, it is easy to ask one thousand social media “friends” to repost information on Twitter or Facebook—and it’s easy to *notice* whether they have done so. These foundational insights from political theory help explain how social media and social networks have become such a vital part of the emerging technological infrastructure that has enabled global solution networks to become a powerful addition to the global problem solving landscape.

Rather than being a hindrance to effective group action, large numbers are now a source of strength. And nowhere is this more the case than with the rise of increasingly powerful Advocacy networks. The review of case examples such as Change.org, Avaaz and 350.org illuminates their strategies for success, their interactions with stakeholders, their use of technology and the broader impact of these modern advocacy movements on global governance and cooperation. It also spells out a number of challenges that Advocacy networks must tackle if they are to become more potent contributors to global problem solving.

## The Evolving Structure of Social Change

While organizations such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Oxfam were once the standards of modern advocacy movements, this is no longer the case. Indeed, these large, centralized non-governmental organizations are being replaced as the most important or influential drivers of change. In today’s increasingly connected world, there is a new bottom-up model of social advocacy in which hundreds of millions of people use social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to advance their causes. In fact, the advocacy and non-governmental sectors have been exploding with legions of more diffuse networks becoming active around an increasingly wide range of issues and projects at local, national and international levels.

The upshot is that individual citizens are getting involved in change, in part because the Internet reduces collective action problems and makes advocacy easier than ever before, and in part because social networks make efforts at global change a highly visible social activity. But does this bottom-up model of advocacy work? As the examples described below



will illustrate, Internet-enabled activists played important roles in the events that have become known as the Arab Spring. They stopped the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) in Congress and helped elect Barack Obama, just to name a few examples. Meanwhile, platforms like Causes.com, Avaaz and Change.org have mobilized unprecedented levels of social engagement by tapping Facebook's mammoth user base for social good. Launched first as a Facebook app in 2007, Causes.com, for example, has enabled 153 million users of the social networking site to organize boycotts, create petitions or raise money for their causes.

In addition to lowering the costs of organizing through social networking, there are longer-term trends that appear to be transforming the very nature of social action. Consider, for example, recent evidence from Harvard political scientists Robert Putnam and Theda Skocpol. They independently registered increased levels of disillusionment with traditional political and civic institutions, but found growing interest in advocacy organizations attached to social causes like women's rights or the environment. They also found that citizens are now more likely to drop in and out of organizations and issues that have an online presence, and less likely to make a long-term commitment to membership in traditional and apolitical associations like the old Rotary Club.<sup>9</sup>

International movements for freedom and democracy provide an example of how action for social change has evolved. In the old paradigm of international advocacy and diplomacy, promoting freedom was the job of the United Nations, national diplomats and a handful of NGOs. The methods for advancing freedom were slow and ineffective. Diplomats might make a few phone calls, activists would write letters and, if the media and activists complained enough, Western countries were occasionally cajoled into applying a smattering of sanctions. Social change as a response to activism took decades if it ever happened at all. Witness the recent events in Iraq, where billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives were lost in a decade-long effort to install democracy from the top down.

## The Arab Spring Illustrates a New Model of Networked Advocacy

Contrast the old model with the extraordinary impact social media and Internet connectivity have had on the so-called Arab Spring in the Middle East. Previously discussed as they fit within the GSN taxonomy definition of Platform networks, the organizations that promulgated the Arab Spring events are also clear examples of Advocacy networks in action. In June 2010, Khaled Said, a 28-year-old Egyptian businessman, was beaten to death by two police officers. (Said had posted a video on the Internet of the policemen dealing illegal drugs.) Within days of his death, an anonymous human-rights activist (later confirmed as a Google executive) created a Facebook page called "We Are All Khaled Said." Posted on the page were photos of Said's battered and bruised body in the morgue as well as Said's



original video of the corrupt police. Within weeks, the Facebook profile had more than 100,000 friends, eventually growing to more than half a million. The focus of the Facebook community was on the brutality of the Egyptian police, but when the Tunisian government fell at the beginning of 2011, the community that had formed around the Egyptian brutality issue was already assembled to take the next steps. More than 5 million people used Facebook in Egypt, and the “We Are All Khaled Said” page served as a rallying point for protesters whose occupation of Tahrir Square would soon force Hosni Mubarak from power.



The Arab Spring was the world's first leaderless revolution.<sup>10</sup>

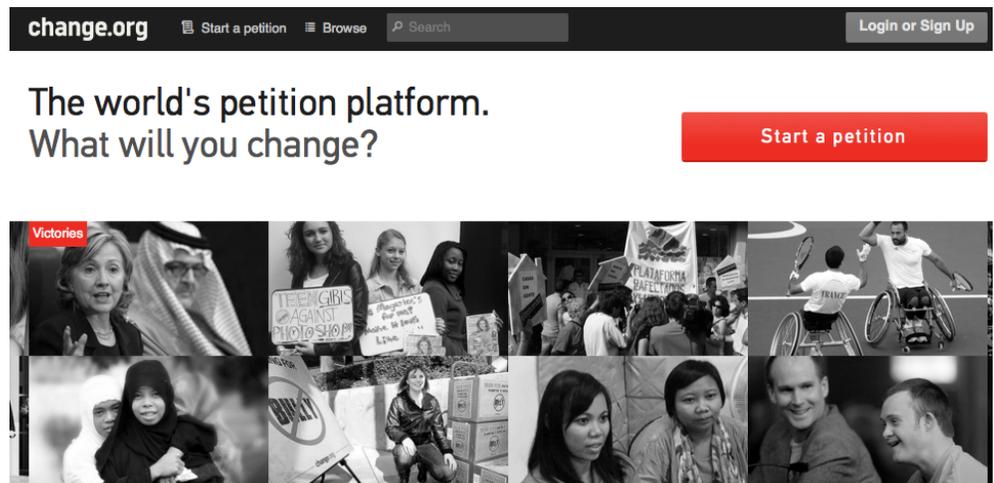
Before long, a wave of rebellion had engulfed not only Egypt and Tunisia, but also Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria. A generation of young people, tired of being treated as subjects and determined to have jobs, justice and democracy, essentially rewrote the rules that govern how global progress is achieved. Armed with a new communications medium that provides access to secular information and with the ability to mobilize without umbrella agencies, their deep stirrings for individual expression and democracy quickly coalesced into organized political movements that reached across national borders to affect real change.

### Change.org: the Web's Largest Global Advocacy Platform

The Arab Spring is just one manifestation of a broader set of radical and even explosive movements toward a more open, just and free world that are enabled by networked technologies. Inspired by the growing adoption of social media, NGOs and Advocacy networks have developed collaboration



action platforms that are purpose-built for orchestrating social change. They are aided by the fact that skills and expertise have become infinitely portable, thanks to the Internet. One of the leading examples is Change.org, one of the Web's largest global advocacy platforms for social activists. The Change.org case is another example of a network that fits both the Advocacy and Platform taxonomic definition.



Change.org, the Web's largest global advocacy network<sup>11</sup>

Change.org empowers individuals to pursue social change by creating online campaigns in support of social causes, from human rights to environmental issues to criminal justice. Founded in 2007, the site brings campaigning into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by tapping into social media. Rather than simply gathering signatures for a petition and moving on, campaigners use social networks such as Facebook and Twitter to engage their peers and turn ordinary citizens into active participants in social dialogue.

Whether issues are local or global, Change.org uses the power of the Internet to help people reach others in relevant communities. In addition to hosting online petitions, the site also provides support for campaigners by offering tips on topics ranging from building support and engaging supporters to attracting media coverage. Currently growing at a rate of more than 2 million new members each month, Change.org is having a significant impact on social issues around the world. The site's "victories" page provides numerous examples of regular citizens who have successfully brought about change through the network. Change.org harnesses technology to make initiating and leading campaigns as simple as possible, while maximizing reach and impact.

From global warming to human trafficking, there are countless examples of social issues about which people feel outrage. Unfortunately, these issues are often so large that individuals feel their voices cannot possibly make a difference, leading many concerned citizens to sit at home and stew over the evening news. While social activism has a long history, organizers of



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grassroots campaigns traditionally relied on methods of communication such as telephone trees and posters on telephone poles—methods that were labor intensive and reached a limited number of people. Starting up a campaign that would reach a global audience was a particular challenge in the days before the Internet, when expensive long distance phone charges and slow overseas mail delivery severely limited worldwide communication. Bringing about even modest social change required a great deal of effort, which meant only the most dedicated activists participated in campaigns.

Traditionally, the work of tackling large social issues was handled by well-established organizations with broad networks of contacts. Groups such as Amnesty International and the World Wildlife Fund were formed to address specific issues on an ongoing basis. These organizations served (and continue to serve) their function admirably, but their size is a double-edged sword. The larger the network, the more people can be reached, but the more difficult it becomes for each participant to have a say in which particular issues are targeted. So, for example, if someone wanted to petition a corporation to stop their factories from polluting, the individual would have to take the issue to an environmental organization and convince the group’s leadership to take on this cause. Since a traditional organization can only take on a limited number of campaigns at a time, not every participant’s ideas can be put into action in a timely manner. While these institutions continue to have an impact in bringing about social change, they are unable to offer the level of personalization and individual ownership expected by many of today’s citizens, especially digital natives who have grown accustomed to creating and immediately publishing their own content using social media.

Ben Rattray, who founded Change.org in 2007, says he started the organization because of this “disconnect between people’s interest in social change and their ability to take powerful action.” The site’s campaigns revolve around online petitions, which people from around the world are able to sign. However, participation doesn’t end with an electronic signature. As Rattray puts it, “It used to be when someone signed a petition, that was the extent of their experience, you put your name on the digital parchment, and that was it. Now, we provide a set of tools to mobilize people...to call the decision-maker, to write a letter to the editor, to really get involved in a campaign. It’s not just a one-off petition.” He explains that social media is key to achieving this deep level of engagement: “The difference between us and other petition sites is, the petitions we develop are saturated in social media. People start a campaign and immediately connect through Facebook and Twitter. That makes them grow much more rapidly, [they are] more viral, and therefore transparent, exposing the decision maker to pressure.”

### Reaching a Tipping Point

According to Rattray, the site reached its tipping point in early 2011, with a campaign demanding that the South African government stop the practice of “corrective rape,” where men rape lesbians to “turn them straight.” “The campaign went massively viral,” says Rattray. “170,000 people joined the campaign from 150 countries and it ended up embarrassing the national government in South Africa.” A government official even phoned Rattray



directly, asking him to stop the campaign, but in the end the petition was successful and a task force was formed to address this deplorable practice. “This is a remarkable demonstration of the potential of the Internet...we were already doing well, there had been episodic victories, but this was a monumental example of the potential of this model.”

Rattray recognized early that simple tools for advocacy could be the most effective. “We recognized that what is most effective is a very simple... petition tool that allows you to aggregate voices around a common objective and then mobilize people for further support.” Rattray draws parallels to consumer Internet phenomena like YouTube and Twitter. The online services that have had massive impacts have tended to be very simple. “YouTube is just about hosting and watching videos. Twitter is just about expressing a momentary thought in short form. Instagram is about taking a photo and sharing it with friends. Simple wins. Simple is effective,” he says.

That recipe has worked for Change.org too. The site takes the hard work out of changing the world by leveraging existing networks to bring likeminded people together for a common cause. Indeed, a quick browse through the site’s “victories” page dramatically reveals the types of social change the site is facilitating and demonstrates that anyone in the world can start a successful global campaign. And while the network’s impact on the world has been clearly demonstrated by its many victories, Change.org also serves as a shining example of how organizations of all kinds can use the Internet to build and grow their networks. “Whereas it took us the first three and a half years of our existence to grow to two million members, we are now growing by 2 million members every month,” says Rattray.

### Thousands of Individual Efforts = A Powerful Collective Force

Although Change.org is growing quickly, it is only one of several collaborative action platforms. Another prominent example is Avaaz.org, a community of 31 million change-minded activists that campaigns in 15 different languages and involves people of all backgrounds and walks of life. Like Change.org, the Avaaz community makes its voice heard on a wide range of local and global issues by signing petitions, funding media campaigns and direct actions, emailing, calling, lobbying governments and organizing “offline” protests and events.





The power of Avaaz-inspired anti-ACTA protests caught European policymakers by surprise.<sup>12</sup>

In one of its most notable accomplishments, Avaaz delivered a petition signed by nearly 3 million members to the European Parliament calling on decision-makers to reject the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement treaty (ACTA). Ostensibly designed to establish international standards for intellectual property rights enforcement, Internet freedom campaigners saw ACTA as a dangerous attack on fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and privacy. Facing mass opposition across Europe, the European Parliament's own press release announcing ACTA's eventual defeat in January 2012 identified the Avaaz petition as a key factor in its decision.

## 350.org: A Global Movement to Fight Climate Change

Climate change has emerged as one of the most challenging global problems. With the exception of a few vocal dissenters, virtually all scientists now agree that the risks associated with a substantial warming of the planet are far too great for the world to do nothing about the soaring levels of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions we pump into the atmosphere. Rising average surface temperatures combined with rapidly expanding deserts, melting Arctic sea ice and ocean acidification already provide what many of the world's top scientists believe to be unequivocal evidence that human activities are fundamentally altering the Earth's climate.<sup>13</sup> Although we cannot fully predict the repercussions, the risk is that if we fail to rein in greenhouse gas emissions there will be devastating social disruption caused by extreme



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weather events, water and food shortages, mass migrations, unpredictable disease patterns and loss of biodiversity.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the effects of climate change will be felt unevenly with the burden falling most heavily on those least able to cope with the consequences, resulting in untold human misery.

Despite knowledge of these catastrophic effects, efforts by state-level and international institutions to control greenhouse gas emissions have been lethargic and ineffective.<sup>15</sup> Although European countries have forged ahead with arguably the world's most progressive measures on climate change, many of the world's largest economies have yet to adopt ambitious climate policies and the failure to secure an international agreement at any of the annual United Nations Climate Change conferences since the mid-1990s has many wondering whether an international agreement is possible at all. Indeed, with economic concerns looming large, climate change has virtually fallen off of the agendas of several of the world's largest producers of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Individuals and organizations frustrated with the failure of political action are turning to Advocacy networks like 350.org. Supported by an international network of climate activists, 350.org uses the Internet, social media and local events to educate the public about the causes and implications of global warming. A large section of its website is dedicated to explaining the science and significance of its name, which refers to 350 parts per million (considered the maximum level of CO<sub>2</sub> that the atmosphere can accommodate before significant climate change occurs). However, 350.org exists to do much more than simply increase awareness of the scientific evidence that points to the need to take action on climate. It also provides an Internet-based platform for social connection that unites networks of the willing and committed across national borders, allowing new ideas, relationships and partnerships to surface in the pursuit of concrete initiatives to raise awareness and also to prompt action to reduce carbon emissions.

A global solution network like 350.org is arguably a critical ingredient in our efforts to prevent runaway climate change. While intergovernmental approaches tend to rely heavily on concentrated groups of experts to formulate policies that they hope will be implemented by national governments, 350.org and similar networks operate from the bottom-up, allowing committed individuals and organizations to coordinate strategies and disseminate knowledge and resources broadly across the network and into their communities. In doing so, they provide a new, more agile way to mobilize and fully exploit the collective ingenuity of citizens and businesses, relying less on central control and more on a self-organized critical mass of people and organizations working in all sectors to initiate small experiments and social innovations that could mushroom into pervasive changes in societal behavior. This approach supplements rather than supplants conventional policy approaches, making it easier for politicians to gain support for the tough measures that will be required to stave off the more drastic effects of climate change.



### The Origins of 350.org

When most young people graduate from college today their first priority is finding a full-time job in their chosen field, ideally one that marries their passions to their need for a stable income. As seniors at Middlebury College, Jeremy Osborn, Phil Aroneau, Will Bates, May Boeve, Jamie Henn and Jon Warnow were not unlike their peers. All youthful environmentalists, Osborn and company wanted to do something impactful after college and saw local environmental organizations as potential vehicles for addressing thorny challenges like climate change. But after meeting up with author and Middlebury's Schuman Distinguished Scholar Bill McKibben at an on-campus environmental group meeting in 2006, their post-graduation plans got decidedly more ambitious. Though they might not have realized it then, their new jobs would entail building a global citizens' movement with the goal of saving the planet—literally.

McKibben and the team all agreed that the current model for addressing climate change was slow, outmoded and largely ineffective. They recognized that governments were making little progress towards putting binding measures in place. And yet, they were savvy enough to realize that their lobbying efforts alone would do little to change the political calculus in Washington or other national capitals. Though a significant proportion of the public was concerned about climate change, environmental groups had so far failed to channel that concern into a groundswell of public activism capable of inspiring the political will to take meaningful action. What was needed, in their minds, was a highly visible national and even international activist movement that could pull in and help coordinate the growing number of small-scale organizations, each pursuing its own agenda and action plan. With the Internet, the group was convinced that it had the tools required to unite local efforts across America, and eventually the world, into a broader coherent network of climate activists that could act in concert.



350.org is organizing a global movement to address climate change.<sup>16</sup>



McKibben et al had been following the work of James Hansen, an American scientist who cited 350 ppm as the safe upper limit of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Considered one of the most accomplished climatologists in the world, Hansen's research suggested that reaching any values above this level would risk catastrophic climate change. The group took this as "a call to action" and decided to name their new organization 350.org.<sup>17</sup>

The group launched "Step It Up," its first campaign, in 2007. Using the Internet, they issued a common call to national action with the goal of forcing political leaders to commit to cutting carbon emissions by 80 percent by 2050. They hoped the call to action would be politically effective and also, according to Osborn, "allow for a lot of creativity and diversity in terms of how people engaged with the 350.org campaign."<sup>18</sup> The results surpassed expectations. The campaign encouraged Americans to organize over 2000 climate change rallies at historic and iconic places throughout the United States.<sup>19</sup>

The highly successful Step It Up campaign became the cornerstone for further accomplishments. The founders focused their energies on branching out beyond the US and building an international social movement that could replicate the model of uniting disparate actions online into a common message on a global basis.

### From the College Campus to a Global Network

Today 350.org has staff members located on all continents, a board of directors, an international advisory council and an American advisory council.<sup>20</sup> More importantly, it has a worldwide network of hundreds of thousands of supporters participating in international days of action, hosting public education events and organizing protests and rallies in various countries.

This level of international coordination would not be possible without the Internet. "Even the Step It Up Campaign in 2007," says Osborn "wouldn't have been possible to coordinate without the technology that wasn't there five years [earlier]."<sup>21</sup> Mapping technology, for example, is key to the group's success in organizing international days of action. As Osborn explains, "Someone might contact the organization and say 'I'm doing an action in Bordeaux, France,' and then the group's directors label this action as a dot on their map. [Then, they]...see that dot on the map in relation to the thousands of other dots of all of the actions that were happening at the same time. For the first time, people could understand global vision and the breadth of what was actually happening."<sup>22</sup> In other words, 350.org could make local organizers and participants see that they were part of a more powerful global movement.

350.org has achieved widespread recognition for its activism. One of the most significant victories occurred on October 24, 2009, when it organized an International Day of Climate Action that resulted in 5,200 rallies in 181 countries. One observer described it as "the most widespread day



of environmental action in history.”<sup>23</sup> The purpose of their efforts was to pressure leaders at the COP-15 conference held in Copenhagen to come up with a substantial, legally binding document. Their actions ultimately failed to change the outcome of the conference, but their efforts illustrate the power of 350.org to bring attention to climate change.

The following year, 350.org organized the 10/10/10 campaign on October 10, 2010. Entitled the “Global Work Party,” coordinators encouraged participants to launch community-based initiatives and actions to help combat global warming. The group estimates that over 7000 events and initiatives were launched in 188 countries, with many volunteers participating in community-based sustainability and clean energy projects.<sup>24</sup> According to Anna Goldstein, U.S. campaign manager for 350.org, the political message to governments was: “We’re getting to work, what about you?”

In August 2011, volunteers led another series of influential protests in Washington against the proposed Keystone XL pipeline. As the largest addition to the Keystone system, the pipeline would transport crude oil from Alberta’s oil sands to refineries in the Gulf Coast region. With many concerned about both the climate impact of accessing and using the tar sands oil and the effects of a potential oil spill, 350.org participated in sit-ins outside of the White House for two weeks. These sit-ins culminated in 1,253 arrests, which did not deter the protestors continuing to engage in civil disobedience.<sup>25</sup> This event was followed by another White House protest in November, 2011, and yet another in February of 2013, all calling on the American president to reject the plans to extend the pipeline.

While the issue of the XL Pipeline remains unresolved and while corporate interests continue to pursue alternative ways to access and deliver the Alberta oil, the final approval is still pending. Recent reports suggest that Secretary of State John Kerry is working behind the scenes with influential partners to begin work on governmental solutions to the threat of climate change.<sup>26</sup> 350.org with its innovative and dogged use of the 21<sup>st</sup> century technology and communication channels can take much of the credit for getting the administration’s attention. Even the *New York Times* took note of McKibben and 350.org for their efforts. They called him “a man not quite of the traditional green establishment...a journalist turned advocate.”<sup>27</sup>

## How Advocacy Networks Help Solve Global Problems

GSN research has led to a taxonomy of ten types of global solution networks; Advocacy networks are one type. Each of the ten types has a functional role and, as discussed in the Prologue to this paper, organizations can be catalogued in more than one of the GSN types.

Advocacy networks exist to mobilize people behind social causes in an effort to influence policy and behavior. In doing so, they play a number of vital



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roles in fostering a broader social climate in which solutions to intractable global issues move from being politically untouchable to becoming politically necessary. These roles include:

**Generating political will.** 350.org, Avaaz and Change.org complement rather than replace state actors and institutions. According to Jeremy Osborn, Operations Director and Co-Founder of 350.org, “The institutions, the UN, national governments, and national bodies, have a huge role to play in setting policy around issues like climate change. But somebody in the US like President Obama, is going to act within a window of what he thinks is politically feasible. And our job is to change what is politically feasible for him.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, their job is not to replace state actors, but to pressure them to act on climate change when that pressure does not exist internally. Osborn calls 350.org “...a laboratory for the best ways to strengthen the climate movement and catalyze transformation around the world.”<sup>29</sup>

**Mobilizing rapid responses.** Advocacy networks like Change.org are not inhibited by the same bureaucratic complexity, procedural inertia and time constraints that governments face, and therefore are able to respond almost immediately to any given issue. The speed and intensity of the Avaaz campaigns around SOPA and ACTA caught many political and industry leaders by surprise. And when a project or policy is revealed that has the potential to increase GHG emissions, 350.org and its volunteers collaborate via the group’s website to engage in action immediately.

**Coordination across borders.** Coordination among nation-states requires complex treaties and the approval of national legislatures. As has been case with issues such as climate change, this process can take decades to unfold and often results in lowest common denominator outcomes. Avaaz’s 31 million members hail from 194 countries. Members of 350.org use the Internet to coordinate and engage volunteers from over 188 countries with nothing more than a common commitment to shared concerns. An advocacy network’s capacity to organize actions on an international scale is key to creating the critical mass that makes political leaders take notice.

**Enabling transparency and participation.** International institutions and forums are closed to the general public and generally fail to provide a level of transparency and openness that would be sufficient to allow interested parties to follow proceedings and register their opinions. In recent years, recognized networks like 350.org have been granted observer status in international forums and have leveraged this status to bring greater scrutiny to the negotiation process and provide a vehicle for informing and engaging the public. This engagement, however, is largely limited to applying moral pressure on climate change negotiators.

Although civil society organizations can act as observers, they cannot, at this point, participate in decision-making regarding climate policies. It is worth noting, however, that Advocacy networks do not have the same representative obligations that governments do. While 350.org, for example, welcomes the participation of individuals or organizations interested in its



“The truth is that for every cause resulting in a high profile victory, there are many worthy issues that fail to get enough traction to make an impact and are left off the agenda.”

organizational focus, it does not have any duty to engage (though it may attract) those who are skeptical of its motives or actions.

**Promoting bottom-up experimentation with new solutions.** Around the world there are already thousands, and probably hundreds of thousands, of collaborations occurring in which everyone from scientists to schoolchildren are mobilizing to do something about carbon emissions. There is no guarantee that these bottom-up initiatives will scale to meet the mammoth tasks ahead. But 350.org provides the tools and social connectivity to ensure that these social experiments don't occur in isolation and that successful projects can be replicated around the world. Some of its recent endeavors include a movie titled *Do the Math*, a short film about the effects of climate change and the climate impact of the fossil fuel industry. The movie has been viewed millions of times.

## The Limitations of Online Advocacy

350.org, Avaaz and Change.org support a model of Internet organizing that allows thousands of individual efforts, however small, to be rapidly combined into a powerful collective force advocating for change. Each of these Advocacy networks offers a remarkable demonstration of the power of the Internet to bring likeminded people together. But not everyone agrees that this is a healthy evolution in the nature of social change. And there are limitations and challenges that Advocacy networks must confront if they are to have more impact in solving global problems.

**Building truly inclusive global networks.** Advocacy networks are often criticized for being extensions of Western middle class values, without any genuine involvement of the communities they often claim to represent. Growing Internet penetration around the world presents an opportunity to broaden networks and boost inclusion. One of the main challenges in building a truly inclusive network, however, is language translation; that is, how can it effectively mobilize action on a global basis when its audience speaks many different languages. Organizers are aware of this challenge and are working towards addressing it. According to Osborn at 350.org, “We have a pretty robust translation system set up, but only for a few languages, so there's always a challenge to reach people in a way that they will be willing to accept information.”<sup>30</sup>

**Focusing on need rather than on marketable causes.** One of the limitations of platforms like Change.org is that a system of global problem solving may emerge in which digital activists tackle only the most marketable causes. The truth is that for every cause resulting in a high profile victory, there are many worthy issues that fail to get enough traction to make an impact and are left off the agenda. As political scientist Clifford Bob put it, the world of social activism is still “a harsh, Darwinian marketplace where legions of desperate groups vie for scarce attention, sympathy, and money.”<sup>31</sup> So while the have-nots of the world are increasingly empowered to make their causes visible,



our limited capacity to pay attention means that only the most magnetic causes may rally significant constituencies.

**Sustaining engagement.** Another limitation of online Advocacy networks like 350.org and Change.org is the ephemeral nature of public attention, which makes sustaining engagement difficult for network leaders. 350.org, for example, has built an international network and successfully mobilized volunteers to bring attention to the implications of climate change. But in the face of continued government inaction and rising economic uncertainty, it is unclear whether 350.org can sustain its momentum. The network needs a significant political victory—perhaps on the Keystone XL pipeline decision—to convince supporters that its advocacy tactics are actually working.

**Building enduring solutions and social capital.** Advocacy networks tend to focus on quick victories and high-profile media stunts, which is both a source of strength and a potential weakness. While such tactics may be effective in raising awareness, they can also be polarizing and may undermine the ability to build the social capital and cross-sector structures required for enduring solutions to global problems. After all, a successful petition campaign may provide the impetus for change, but it does not necessarily offer a viable solution or provide a vehicle to organize constituents around innovative grassroots projects. Such solution-focused roles can, however, be taken up by other network types in the GSN taxonomy. Policy networks can formulate new policy solutions, for example, and operational and delivery networks can bring corporations, governments and civil society groups together to experiment with and implement new approaches. In other words, solutions to complex issues like climate change will typically require a full complement of network types and it is important to be cognizant of both the strengths and limitations of Advocacy networks in addressing global issues.

## Implications for Network Leaders

This report has focused on a variety of social movements and online platforms to better understand how modern Advocacy networks are reshaping the global environment and creating new possibilities for solving global problems. Change.org and Avaaz are both multi-issue platforms for advocacy that organize large communities of individuals around an incredibly diverse range of causes. 350.org, on the other hand, represents the concerns of a sizeable portion of the global population who wish to see governments take more aggressive action on climate change. All three networks, however, gain their power and authority from millions of individual supporters, and in particular, from their ability to deploy those individuals creatively in highly visible, well-orchestrated campaigns that garner media attention and encourage governments and corporations to respond.



There are a number of key lessons to draw from the experiences of the advocacy organizations discussed, and some additional reflections on the challenges and opportunities network leaders will face in using social advocacy to foster solutions to global problems.

**GSNs can harness a great diversity of engagement options.** Not only does the Internet give rise to a broader spectrum of engagement options, it challenges the role of traditional charities and non-governmental organizations in a world where citizens can engage directly through global solution networks. Of course, that does not mean everyone will choose to engage directly, but people are getting involved in growing numbers. While writing a check still constitutes an integral aspect of engagement, as does volunteering, concerned citizens can do everything from the relatively trivial expression of support (say, putting a logo or fundraising application on a Facebook page) to organizing local meet-ups, contributing knowledge and expertise toward a specific problem or leveraging in-place technologies in support of emerging goals. GSNs can tap this more direct and participatory style of engagement by using social media to communicate and collaborate with stakeholders and supporters and by leveraging advocacy platforms like Causes.com and Avaaz to raise awareness and launch public petitions and campaigns.

**Digital citizens embrace a networked model of engagement and advocacy; GSNs should tap their energy and enthusiasm.** There is growing fear that we will leave a deeply troubled planet to the next generations. In emerging nations, young people demand the same freedoms and opportunities that the rest of the world has long enjoyed. And thanks to platforms like Avaaz and Change.org, it's increasingly difficult for the powers that be to either deny that there is a problem or to prevent the young from organizing to achieve their goals.

For the first time, a huge proportion of the global population can connect and collaborate using mobile devices and social networks. They can express their social and political aspirations with tremendous speed and impact, and there is little that traditional authorities can do to circumvent them. Whether pursuing issues like climate change or economic injustice and unemployment, all GSNs should make conscious and explicit efforts to engage these digital citizens. Engaging youth ambassadors to spread the word on social media, elevating young people to spokesperson roles and using popular celebrities to promote involvement in problem solving can help raise awareness and involvement. But more importantly, GSNs should carve out genuine youth-oriented leadership roles in their networks, such as putting young people in charge of digital engagement strategies.

**Weak ties can be exceptionally powerful when networked together.** Going back to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and anti-Apartheid campaigns of the 1980s, activists have sought to build ties with like-minded groups in order to share critical resources and acquire strength in numbers. The Internet has dramatically amplified the value of weak ties between disparate groups, and platforms like Avaaz and Change.org provide the tools to make global solution networks even more effective. In fact, one of the



greatest impacts of the freedom movements that shook the Arab world was their ability to use social media to win support from sympathizers abroad, especially large diasporas in Europe, North America and Australia. And the benefits are not limited to advocacy. The same weak ties can be mobilized to alter or influence socially and environmentally destructive behavior patterns. Advocacy platforms that facilitate new levels of transparency around our personal impact on the planet can be powerful motivators for adoption of sustainable lifestyles.

**Even the biggest accomplishments begin with small victories.** While major issues like global warming and human trafficking can't be solved overnight, Advocacy networks give ordinary citizens the power to make governments, corporations and organizations change their practices within a relatively brief period of time. Change.org and Avaaz litter their homepages and email blasts with recent victories to reassure contributors that their efforts are making a difference. The point is that no project is so massive that people can't chip away at it by breaking it down into manageable pieces. Just as Wikipedia taps the contributions of millions by breaking down the task of producing an encyclopedia into a series of discrete tasks, GSNs must excel in the art of crafting bit-size opportunities to participate that result in identifiable outcomes. GSNs must also be sure to publicly celebrate these small victories along the way. The act of celebrating victories and rewarding participants builds morale and momentum en route to accomplishing larger goals.

**A GSN can grow by narrowing its focus.** A common problem in modern advocacy movements is the temptation to place a "laundry list" of issues under a common umbrella. Such tactics may increase engagement. They may be inclusive. But they dilute and overcomplicate the message. And in the case of the Occupy movement, it can be argued that a lack of clear focus undermined effectiveness. Platforms for problem solving enjoy the most success when they identify a critical need and concentrate their efforts on addressing it with simple tools. Change.org, for example, has been successful by focusing on one core service: hosting and supporting online petitions. Rather than overwhelming people with too many tools and functions, global solution networks should work on improving and simplifying their most important service.

**GSNs have only begun to tap the potential for Internet-based innovation in social organizing.** 350.org, Avaaz and Change.org represent exemplary uses of the Internet to coordinate effective campaigns. Avaaz's successful anti-ACTA campaign would not have been possible without its online petitions. And technology, such as mapping technology, has helped 350.org's organizers to visibly aggregate and coordinate their actions online under the banner of one common goal. 350.org could disseminate information about the science of climate change using new forms of data visualization, for example. It could also demonstrate ingenuity in its online organizing tactics. Rather than simply coordinating rallies and sit-ins on a global basis, why not organize an internationally representative global citizen's council on climate change as a counterweight to the traditional UN bodies? The digital age offers an abundance of new models of citizen engagement, and networks like 350.org should be at the forefront of experimenting with them.



**Equating difficulty with effectiveness misses the point of social change.**

Commentators such as Malcolm Gladwell have designated people who participate in online campaigns as slacker activists, or “slacktivists,” suggesting that these people feel good about themselves without putting any significant amount of effort into their activism and that they are not actually bringing about social change. Change.org offers a counterpoint by showing how individuals can come together to create change without making a full time job out of it. Rattray explains that, “The goal isn’t to make social change difficult,” and suggests that, “people too often conflate effectiveness with difficulty.” In fact, GSNs should structure public participation in Advocacy networks with a spectrum of engagement in mind. Enthusiasts will gravitate toward visible roles with more time-intensive, leadership requirements. Participants with less time, or lower levels of personal engagement, should still be able to make a difference by fulfilling less onerous tasks.

**Working together, even to change the world, doesn’t have to involve a great deal of effort.**

In the spirit of the “work smarter, not harder” mantra, Advocacy networks demonstrate that mass collaboration can result in successful projects while reducing each participant’s workload. Naturally, people will be more willing to participate if they feel they can make a significant contribution with a small amount of effort. The fact that Avaaz and Change.org are integrated with sites like Facebook and Twitter, for example, makes it easy for people to spread the word to their existing contacts. The lesson for GSNs is that saving the world should not only be cost effective, it should be social and it should be fun!

**Advocacy networks are often judged to be ineffective in generating change, which ignores their objective of increasing awareness.**

It is difficult to measure the success of activism that seeks to better inform the audience about issues and challenges in a very complicated world. Simply disseminating information and encouraging members to extend the reach of the network through their own social contacts can be extremely effective in creating groundswells of action and changes of behavior. From 350.org’s experience, it is clear that Advocacy networks play vital roles in addressing complex global issues like climate change. But in light of the slow progress on climate change solutions, there is an argument to be made that 350.org has relied too heavily on defining its successes in terms of concrete changes in government policy. Less tangible, but arguably just as critical successes may have resulted from focusing attention of a large and well-networked populace on the issues of climate change. If governments are stalled and bogged down in a mire of competing interests, 350.org can at least measure its progress by tracking the implementation and results of community-based initiatives that have been organized by its members. It is for a different network type to generate and deliver the solutions to the problems that Advocacy networks identify and inform.



## Endnotes

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- 14 To escape the worst effects of climate change global temperatures cannot rise by more than 2 degrees from pre-industrial levels according to scientific consensus. The observed temperature today has already risen by 0.7 degrees. That may not seem like much of an increase, but for Mother Nature it's a lot. Tom Friedman makes a helpful analogy with body temperature. "If your body temperature goes from 98.5 to 100.6, you don't feel so good. If it goes from 100.6 to 102.6, you go to the hospital. So does Mother Nature." To put the challenge in perspective, an average American "produces" about 20 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> every year through normal activities such as driving, heating their home and consuming food.

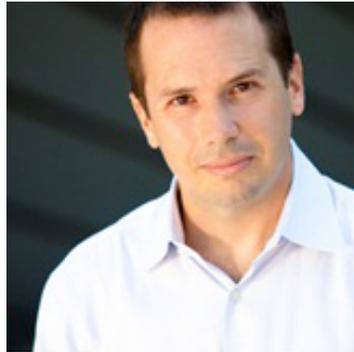


Limiting temperature rise to below 4 degrees will require the average to fall to below 2 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per year, an undertaking that is practically inconceivable given our current lifestyles and infrastructure. See: Darrel Moellendorf, "Treaty Norms and Climate Change Mitigation", Carnegie Council (September 11, 2009).

- 15 The December 2009 meeting of world leaders in Copenhagen, for example, was once heralded as a defining moment for humanity and a chance to prove definitively that international cooperation can and will prevail against the challenges facing the planet. Despite years of preparation and many heads of state in attendance, Copenhagen produced a 12-paragraph "accord" with weak targets, no details and no binding commitments. The failure to secure a meaningful deal in Copenhagen has many questioning whether a political deal is possible at all. "The forces trying to tackle climate change are in disarray, wandering in small groups around the battlefield like a beaten army," said one senior British diplomat. Quoted in Damian Carrington, Suzanne Goldenberg, Juliette Jowit, Jonathan Watts, Alok Jha, James Randerson, David Smith, David Adam, and Tom Hennigan, "Global deal on climate change in 2010 'all but impossible.'" *The Guardian*, February 2, 2010.
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**Global Solution Networks** is a landmark study of the potential of global web-based and mobile networks for cooperation, problem solving and governance. This project is a deliverable of the research program, offered through the Martin Prosperity Institute at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto.

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Ten Types of Global Solution Networks