

Spring 1-1-2011

From the Seats to the Streets: MoveOn.org and the Mobilization of Online Progressive Activists

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FROM THE SEATS TO THE STREETS: MOVEON.ORG AND THE MOBILIZATION OF
ONLINE PROGRESSIVE ACTIVISTS

by

MARC ANDREW EATON

B.A., Western Washington University, 2002

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Sociology

2011

This thesis entitled:
From the Seats to the Streets: MoveOn.org and the Mobilization of Online Progressive Activists
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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

IRB Protocol # 0406.13

Eaton, Marc Andrew (Ph.D., Sociology)

From the Seats to the Streets: MoveOn.org and the Mobilization of Online Progressive Activists

Thesis directed by Professor Patricia A. Adler

I examine how the progressive organization MoveOn.org uses the internet to organize citizens for both online and offline activism. The data are drawn from four years of online and offline participant observation in MoveOn, sixty interviews with members and staff, sixteen informal interviews with congressional office workers, five interviews with leaders of other online activist organizations, and hundreds of documents. This study connects MoveOn's national-level strategic decision-making to the everyday realities of participation by MoveOn members, and contextualizes this within the media-driven contemporary American culture. First, I describe how MoveOn attempts to create a sense of community among members, and show how members react to these attempts. Next, I trace members' paths to and through MoveOn, and explain how their participation affected their self-identities. Then, I reveal how members' interpretations of MoveOn's organizational identity are influenced by portrayals of MoveOn in the news and by the organization itself. Following this, I show how MoveOn's strategy is fundamentally tied to the news cycle, and discuss how it stages and scripts its offline actions to maximize media attention. Finally, I investigate MoveOn's effectiveness by focusing on its political advocacy, election work, message framing, and development of an online organizing model. I conclude by discussing how these empirical findings illuminate sociological understandings of the self, identity, community, media, and social movements.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have a lot of people to thank for helping me finish this project, and for supporting me along the way. First of all, I want to thank my beautiful, wonderful wife Alice for being so supportive and understanding all along the way. You put up with living alone for many months while I worked day and night on this project up on Orcas Island, and always remained my biggest cheerleader even when I doubted myself. I love you so much!

Secondly, I want to thank my family. Mom and Dad, you have always been so supportive of my academic work, even from the days of spelling bees and multiplication tables. I can't thank you enough for helping me out academically, financially, and in every other way. I love you both very much, and appreciate all of the hard work you both have done to make sure I could achieve this goal. I am glad I can make you proud. Tom and Julia, I love you both, and I thank you so much for allowing me to live at your beautiful homes on Orcas and in Seattle while I worked on this project. I don't know if I could have finished it without these quiet spaces in which to work. I also deeply appreciate your kindness, conversations about this project, and constant support while I pursued this goal. Likewise, I thank Grandma Allie for allowing me to set up shop for a few months in your basement to hammer out the final versions of these chapters. I also thank Grandma Anita and Mike, Meghan, Simona, and Ryder for always being there for me when I needed to get back home and get my mind off of this project for a while. Thanks for understanding why I couldn't be around more often—hopefully now I can be more of a grandson, brother, and uncle to you!

Lastly, I want to thank all of the members of my dissertation committee for your supportive words, constructive criticisms, patience, and belief in me during my long journey through the graduate program. Patti, you have made me a much better writer and more critical social analyst through your tireless reading of chapter drafts and journal submissions. You were there with supportive words, constructive criticisms, and encouragement throughout. I'll never be able to repay your dedication to me, but I hope that this completed dissertation is at least partial recompense. Leslie, Dan, Tom, and Bryan: thanks to each of you for reading earlier drafts of these chapters, for thoughtful comments that helped me make this dissertation stronger, and for your encouragement throughout my research and writing. I admire you all, and am honored to have you on my committee. In addition, I want to thank Allison Hicks for reading and commenting on earlier portions of this project, and for giving me guidance on how to make it through the writing process without losing my mind. I appreciate your friendship and your assistance all along the way.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I grab my coat and gloves, and head out into the dark. It's 6:30am, Election Day 2004. The polls open in a half-hour and, although it is only fifteen degrees Fahrenheit at the moment, I am committed to watching the polls for MoveOn until 7:00pm tonight, confirming that each and every one of the voters I contacted during my months of get-out-the-vote work make it to the polls. I drive the short distance to my local polling location, a red brick elementary school, and meet with Kathy, another local MoveOn volunteer who has agreed to help me. Despite having never met, Kathy kindly brings me a piping hot coffee, which I eagerly accept. For the next twelve hours, Kathy and I alternate shifts sitting outside the polling location in the frigid weather, asking voters if they had pledged to MoveOn that they would vote for John Kerry, and checking their names off of a list of local voters contacted by MoveOn volunteers in our neighborhood.

The day drags on. The sun comes out, but it does not chase away the biting cold. First my feet and then my hands become numb, and I retreat briefly to my apartment to warm up. While enjoying a bowl of hot soup for lunch, I hear on the radio that John Kerry is leading in early exit polls. This news sends a jolt of renewed energy through me, and I spend the afternoon going door to door, trying to track down voters who had not yet appeared at the polling location that Kathy and I had staked out before dawn.

The sun sets and I return to the polling location, now the sole holdout at our temporary encampment. I count the minutes until 7:00pm finally arrives, and load our small MoveOn sign, chair, and table into the trunk of my car. Without hesitation, I drive downtown to meet with other MoveOn volunteers at an Italian restaurant for what I assume will be a victory party. As I walk

in, the solemn tone and emotionless statistics scrolling across the flatscreen televisions above the bar tell me all I need to know: we're going down. I stay for nearly an hour, hoping that, by some miracle, the tide will turn and Kerry will somehow pull out a come-from-behind victory, but it is not to be. Tired, depressed, and alone, I retreat to my apartment. I crawl in bed, feeling like I have done all I can to prevent Bush from getting reelected, and realizing that this knowledge does nothing to erase the shock and sadness I feel.

Flash forward two years. I am rushing to the temporary phone banking office MoveOn set up in my city. I park the car in a newly built mixed-use neighborhood, where utilitarian looking condominiums mingle with oddly out of place small businesses. The whole neighborhood looks as though the suburbs somehow mated with an industrial park. Up the stairs I go, holding my breath as I pass briskly by the scented soap shop located below MoveOn's temporary office. On the way up the stairs, I navigate around other MoveOn volunteers sitting on the steps, leaning into their cell phones to hear the voters on the other end of their conversations over the voices echoing off the white cinder block walls of the stairwell. "That's a good sign," I think, knowing that this spillover must mean the office is crowded.

Indeed, as I step into the office on the second floor, I see at least thirty volunteers crowded around the folding tables lent by local MoveOn members, each pressing a cell phone to one ear while jamming a finger into the opposite ear to hear the voters above the din. The room seems bright on this cold but clear November day, Election Day 2006. It is probably just the sun reflecting off of the barren white cinder block walls, but perhaps this brightness also results from my *own* reflection upon how very different things were only two years ago, when I felt as though I was toiling away in complete isolation from other progressives. Today, volunteers flow in faster than the field organizers can print voter contact lists, and the excitement of perceived

momentum drives one volunteer to say to no one in particular, “I think we’re going to do it!” I grab a handful of voter contact lists from Andy, a field organizer who is desperately printing more call sheets to feed volunteers’ insatiable appetites, and settle in between a graying woman in a knitted sweater and a large 40-something man in a plaid flannel shirt. Both are engrossed in conversations with voters, and barely glance up as I slide into my seat and begin what will be a four-hour calling shift.

After the polls have closed, I meet Andy and two other field organizers at a local bar, where we gather around a small television in the corner and watch the election results so intently you would have thought we were watching the Apollo Moon landing. We share hugs, backslaps, and several pitchers of beer as it begins to dawn on us that the Democratic landslide we envisioned is indeed becoming a reality. We cheer when Rick Santorum, a conservative Republican senator from Pennsylvania, is defeated by Bob Casey, a Democratic candidate for whom our office had been calling for the past five days. We cheer again when Claire McCaskill, another Democrat supported by MoveOn, takes a Missouri Senate seat. Each of us feels a sense of personal responsibility for these victories, as though *our* calls were the deciding factors in these campaigns. Progressives have come a long way from two years ago, and tonight we’re going to celebrate.

Two years later, the scene is much the same. I am standing in an enclosed patio area behind a rundown tavern, whose exposed brick and concrete walls clash with the large flatscreen televisions and mirrored shelving that adorn the bar. With me are seven of my fellow MoveOn organizers: three paid field organizers, and four volunteer regional coordinators like myself, each wearing our MoveOn and Obama paraphernalia. People are lined up three deep at the bar, waving \$20 bills at the bartender as he mixes cocktails with robotic efficiency. My friends and I

are counting down the minutes until polls close on the West Coast, and watching CNN broadcast live images of the enormous gathering of Obama supporters at Grant Park in Chicago. I feel a particular affinity for that crowd, having dedicated every available moment over the past eight months to MoveOn's recruitment efforts for the Obama campaign, as did all of my companions.

"Three...Two...One!" the crowd chants as the polls finally close. A split second of hesitation hangs in the air as "Barack Obama Elected President" flashes onto CNN's screen, and then the crowd absolutely erupts in cheers. Almost instinctively, I begin hugging friends and strangers alike. Tears steam down the cheeks of the field organizers as they hold tightly onto one another, the way exhausted but elated marathoners might after crossing the finish line. We share a moment of pure joy and hope as we realize how far MoveOn, the progressive movement, and the nation have come from only four years ago.

This research captures one small slice of this period in American history. Through my participation in MoveOn, I experienced and witnessed some of the most exciting political struggles that have occurred in this country since the upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, I had an insider's perspective on one of the most influential political organizations of the past two decades. In many ways, my trajectory from perceived isolation and depression in 2004 to joy and hope in 2008 reflected the experiences of many progressives. It likewise reflected MoveOn's ten-year transformation from a promising but unproven organization run by political novices to a well-oiled progressive powerhouse. Although my research could not possibly capture all aspects of MoveOn's rise to political power, it provides a rare glimpse into the inner workings of this organization. In doing so, it illuminates the processes by which an internet-based organization like MoveOn can mobilize thousands—and sometimes even hundreds of thousands—of ordinary Americans for both online and offline activism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research compliments other studies of MoveOn. Scholars, journalists, and political commentators share a consensus that MoveOn was “the first important online progressive organization” (Feld and Wilcox 2008:xi), and continues to be at the forefront of the progressive movement (Bai 2007a; Carty and Onyett 2006; Hamm 2008; Heaney and Rojas 2007; Jacobs 2005; Rheingold 2004). Heaney and Rojas (2007) single out MoveOn as a leading mobilizer of “movement-partisans,” people who have partisan (in this case, Democratic) leanings but choose to act through outsider organizations rather than the party structure. Indeed, MoveOn is one of the most highly linked-to sites within the progressive web sphere (Farrall and Delli Carpini 2004; Hara and Estrada 2005). Kern (2004) and Bruno (2009) note MoveOn’s ability to create an “echo chamber” in relation to its issues by creating buzz through innovative use of the internet and member-driven content, like its “Bush in 30 Seconds” and “Obama in 30 Seconds” ad contests in 2004 and 2008, respectively.

Central to MoveOn’s mobilization strategy is its e-mail list, which it continually builds by choosing hot-button political issues (Bai 2007a; Hurowitz 2007; Pariser 2004; Welch 2003). As Peter Schurman, former executive director of MoveOn, said, “MoveOn typically won’t engage on an issue until it’s close to a tipping point where engaging a large number of our members can really make the decisive difference” (Welch 2003:11). MoveOn makes it easy for “members” (people on its e-mail list) to act on these issues through e-petitions, online donations, online event locating programs, and other internet-based tools that streamline activism and lower the threshold for participation (Rohlinger and Brown 2009; Hara 2008; Toensing and El-Amine 2003). MoveOn also builds this list through “viral marketing” (Fine 2006), encouraging members to forward videos, petitions, and other information to friends and family. It keeps

members engaged by frequently asking for feedback and constantly sending new solicitations for action. If they have the time and desire, members can climb MoveOn's "ladder of engagement," moving first from online petitions to attendance at offline events, and eventually to leadership positions in MoveOn's council system or get-out-the-vote programs (Karpf 2009).

MoveOn has created the definitive model for a new generation of internet-based activist organizations. The low threshold for membership creates a huge pool of members with broad interests, thus giving MoveOn the ability to truly be a multi-issue organization. At the same time, the low cost of e-mail facilitates frequent communication, which helps create a sense of community among members (as I discuss in Chapter Four). In addition, the speed of e-mail means MoveOn can activate members when issues are "hot." This broad membership base and ability to mobilize on a variety of hot-button issues means MoveOn can raise large sums of money very quickly by pooling small contributions (Karpf 2009). Furthermore, by combining well-cited political information and opportunities for action within its e-mail messages, MoveOn is helping to create a more informed and engaged population, which in turn facilitates more dialogue within the democratic "public sphere" (Carty 2008; Fine 2006; Rohlinger and Brown 2009).

INTERNET ACTIVISM AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Speculation about the effects of the internet upon democratic participation began in the late 1980s, when Downing (1989) suggested that the internet would help activists gather information, communicate with one another, and mobilize on a global scale. Later research has largely supported these claims (Bennett 2003; Danitz and Stroebel 2001; Gillan 2009; Gurak and Logie 2003; Myers 1994; Pickerill 2003; Van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht 2004; see Garrett 2006 for a review). A primary example of this new model of activism is the Zapatista movement,

a Mexican guerrilla movement that has used the internet to publicize its struggle against the Mexican government. The Zapatistas have circumvented traditional media and spread their message by using e-mail to contact sympathetic activists outside of Mexico, who then relay their messages to alternative media outlets and other activist groups (Russell 2001). Other movements, including the anti-globalization movement, the anti-war movement, and even the strategic voting movement (i.e., “Nader traders” during the 2000 election) have utilized the cheap, instantaneous, and global reach of the internet to advance their causes (Bennett 2003; Carty 2002; Earl and Schussman 2003; Gillan 2009; Kahn and Kellner 2004; Moore 2003; Schussman and Earl 2004; Van Aelst and Walgrave 2002; Vegh 2003).

However, many of the same scholars who pointed out these democratizing effects warned that the lack of face-to-face communication inherent to internet-based activism could undermine movement solidarity, reduce collective identity formation, and thereby make it easier for activists to withdraw from the movement (Diani 2000; Stoecker 2002). They are also concerned that the ease of online participation facilitates knee-jerk emotional reactions rather than activism based on informed opinions (Bennett 2003; Chadwick 2006; Danitz and Stroebel 2001; Gillan 2009; Howard 2003; Klotz 2007; Pickerill 2003; Van de Donk et al. 2004). Several researchers argue that the internet is not revolutionary in any way, but merely “allows [people] to do the same thing in a different way” (Hill and Hughes 1998:44; Margolis and Resnick 2000; Scott and Street 2000). Earl and Kimport (2008), for example, found that online activist websites relied upon familiar tactics (petitions, boycotts, letter-writing campaigns) and targeted traditional actors (corporations and government bodies, especially legislatures). Similarly, Galusky (2003) and Pickerill (2003) revealed that online activist organizations often use traditional top-down communication models that do not facilitate formation of grassroots social networks.

Researchers studying the effects of the internet upon mainstream political participation have found a similar variety of effects. Some commentators argue the internet will revolutionize grassroots organizing (Plouffe 2009; Trippi 2004) and accelerate the pace of the issue attention cycle (Bimber 2000). Others argue that e-mail and websites offer little to no improvement in voter mobilization compared to mass mailings or phone calls (Bimber 2001; Nickerson 2007; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002). Chadwick (2006) and Klotz (2007) caution that e-petitions may actually harm the democratic process by creating a system of “plagiarized participation” (Klotz 2007), wherein people lobby their representatives using prefabricated demands. This leads to “thin citizenship” (Howard 2003), in which people respond to political urges but do not form their own informed opinions about issues. It also decreases the effectiveness of citizen input by overwhelming legislators with thousands of identical statements (Chadwick 2006). The overall trend in studies of the relationship between the internet and mainstream political participation mirrors research on online activism: the internet may make processes of communication and mobilization cheaper and easier, but by itself it has limited influence on who gets involved, why they get involved, and whether they become integrated into communities of like-minded activists (Agre 2002; Hill and Hughes 1997; Jackson and Lilleker 2007; Johnson 2001; Johnson and Kaye 2003; Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Weber, Loumakis, and Bergman 2003).

Nearly all of this research has examined online activism “from on high,” as an object of analysis rather than a subjective experience. Where my research advances knowledge of MoveOn in particular and internet-based activism more generally is in the latter realm. I explore the interactive meaning-making and identity-altering experiences of participating in this form of activism. More specifically, I examine community construction, identity development,

organizational identity framing, strategic dramaturgical displays of protest, and various measures of effectiveness.

COMMUNITY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Wellman said community consists of “networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity” (2001:228).

Traditionally, community was rooted in face-to-face interactions in the context of a place-based sense of belonging (Durkheim [1893] 1997; Tönnies [1877] 2001). With the rise of technologies that allowed communication in absence of physical co-presence, people were able to imagine they belonged to communities that were based on perceived commonalities in nationality or beliefs (Anderson 1983). Although—as will be discussed below—advocates of online community are excited by the possibility of technologically-mediated imagined communities, some scholars decry the loss of traditional forms of community and consequent decline in certain types of civic engagement.

Putnam (2000) traces in detail the decline in popularity of fraternal groups, bowling leagues, and other organizations within the United States that help to create community bonds. He argues that the loss of such groups has caused a reduction in “social capital,” which he defines as “social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000:19). Social capital can be broken down into two types: “bridging social capital,” which links people to diverse groups outside of their immediate social circles, and “bonding social capital,” which consists of feelings of solidarity and reciprocity among members of a social group. In the absence of community organizations that foster both types of social capital, Putnam (2000) believes that people have become less willing to engage in civic activities like voting, volunteer work, and participating in political organizations. In place of this community-

based participation, “tertiary organizations” have emerged that simply ask members to send money to support professional lobbying groups, instead of encouraging active participation in the political process (Putnam 2000).

Theda Skocpol’s (2003) analysis of Americans’ participation in volunteer organizations largely supports this argument. Skocpol claims that the voluntary organizations that flourished during the period between the U.S. Civil War and the 1960s were crucibles of social capital that taught important civic leadership skills, fostered connections between members of different social classes, and provided a sense of belonging and real political clout to otherwise disempowered individuals. These organizations faded as youth in the 1960s and 1970s instead joined the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements, among others. By the mid-1970s, these organizations began transforming into professionalized advocacy organizations that only asked members to donate, not participate. Like Putnam, Skocpol is critical of these organizations because they replaced community-based civic engagement with impersonal, mass mail-based organizations in which members were treated “not as fellow citizens but as consumers with policy preferences” (Skocpol 2003:211).

These critiques are valid in their own right, but they largely ignore the communities and forms of engagement that have emerged on the internet¹. Online communities first developed in the late 1980s among the first generation of tech-savvy internet users (Rheingold 1993). Currently, there is essentially limitless potential for online social networking through sites like MySpace and Facebook (Lenhart and Madden 2007). Scholars are split, however, on whether online social connections can provide the same level of social capital and sense of belonging that members experience in traditional face-to-face communities. Rheingold (1993) championed the

¹ Putnam does briefly address the potential impact of the Internet upon community formation, but he suspects that the ability to shop around for groups of like-minded others will lead to what he calls “cyberbalkanization” (2000, p.177).

internet as a new “electronic frontier” for establishing communities, and suggested that it “has the capacity to... revitalize citizen-based democracy” by allowing people to inform themselves and create communities of interest that are unbounded by geography (1993:14). Along these lines, Pliskin and Romm (1997) found that striking Israeli university employees established feelings of solidarity over e-mail despite geographic separation, and hypothesized that such feelings were possible because e-mail provided an “illusion of closeness” that counteracted their physical isolation from one another. Scott and Johnson (2005) similarly concluded that the internet could support sustainable communities as long as members were able to communicate. On the other hand, several researchers argue that online communities provide “convenient togetherness without real responsibility” (Fernback 2007:63). In other words, people use online communities to fulfill their *own* desires for expression and connection, but do not experience feelings of caring and responsibility toward other group members (Wellman 2001; Wellman et al. 1996; Wellman et al. 2001).

Many studies of online communities show that these communities are strengthened when participants are able to establish offline connections. Wellman et al. (2003) found that residents of “Netville,” a pseudonymous town with high-speed internet, used the internet to extend face-to-face social networks and integrated online discussions into their daily lives. In separate studies, Baker and Ward (2002) and Fox and Roberts (1999) both concluded that online communities thrived only when they were rooted in offline communities in which members were bonded by geography or common experiences. Futrell and Simi (2004) also showed how participation on White Power internet discussion boards reinforced feelings of solidarity that emerged in the context of offline participation in movement music festivals and other White Power activities.

Together, these studies underscore the continued importance of offline social networks for community development and maintenance, even when the internet is the primary site of interaction. Moreover, they show that the distinction between “real” and “virtual” communities is becoming less valid as online and offline communities become increasingly enmeshed (Bakardjieva 2003; Fernback 2007; Fox 2004; Gochenour 2006; Wellman 2001; Wellman and Gulia 1999). My study of MoveOn adds to this body of research by showing how MoveOn attempts to create a sense of community among members through its online communications and invitations for offline activism.

SELF AND IDENTITY

Along with examining community construction in MoveOn, I trace the ways that participation affects the identities of those involved. This analysis is rooted in a symbolic interactionist approach to the self and identity. From this perspective, the self is shaped through social interactions in which an individual comes to an understanding of his or her “self” by learning to take on other’s perspectives, and by recognizing that this “self” is defined in relationship to the society in which he or she lives (Cooley 1902; James [1890] 1983; Mead [1934] 1962). Blumer (1969) proposed that all meaning, including one’s sense of self, was negotiated through interactions with others in social situations. Like Cooley (1902), Blumer believed that self-definitions were fundamentally shaped by people’s interpretations of other’s perceptions of them. Stryker agreed with this basic premise, but focused more on how the self was made up of various role-based identities. According to Stryker (1980), identities are rooted in “structured role relationships” and ordered in a “hierarchy of identity salience.” He defined identity salience as “the probability, for a given person, of a given identity being invoked in a variety of situations” (1968:560). Stryker claimed that highly salient identities were central to a

person's sense of self, and as a result people would seek roles that reinforced their most salient identities.

Many scholars have used the symbolic interactionist perspective to examine self and identity as they relate to their subfields of interest. Within the subfield of social movement research, Gecas' (2000) concept of "value identity" is particularly relevant. Gecas defined value identities as self-definitions that "characterize the moral or political or philosophical stand that persons take and in terms of which define themselves" (2000:98). He argued that value identities were based on ideologies that, when internalized as personal values, "give meaning, purpose, and direction to individuals" (2000:98). According to Gecas, social movement participation supports value identities by giving people opportunities to act on their values. Through participation, people begin to identify their values as integral parts of their overall self-concepts. This is particularly true if participation enhances members' senses of self-efficacy and authenticity, which Gecas described as "the motivation to perceive oneself as a causal agent in one's environment" and "the individual's strivings for... congruence between their self-values and their behavior," respectively (2000:101).

Although Gecas proposed this concept in a volume dedicated to the examination of self and identity in social movements (Stryker, Owens, and White 2000), it has yet to be integrated into scholarly examinations of the role of identity in movements. Much of this research has focused instead on how socially based identities like "woman" or "queer" serve as a basis for community building and social or political challenges (Freeman 1973; Gamson 1995; Taylor 1989; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Others have conceptualized processes of "identity talk" (Hunt and Benford 1994) and "identity work" (Snow and Anderson 1987; Snow and McAdam 2000), in which activists use the "vocabularies of motive" (Benford 1993; Mills 1940) provided by movement

organizations to construct personal identities that are consistent with the collective identities and goals of the organizations in which they are participating (Armato and Marsiglio 2002; Broad 2002; Einwohner 2002; Kiecolt 2000; McCorkel and Rodriguez 2009; Stryker 2000).

My study of identity transformation in MoveOn expands upon this research by showing how social movement participation helps individuals develop identities *as activists*. I draw upon the insights of Blumer (1969), Stryker (1968, 1980), and Gecas (2000) to outline processes of activist identity construction and reinforcement among MoveOn members. The few sociological examinations of activist identity that exist show that activist identity is highly salient among movement participants, and is a good indicator of long-term commitment to activism (Bobel 2007; Downton and Wehr 1998; McAdam 1989; Whalen and Flacks 1989). This analysis of activist identity is especially relevant in light of the contemporary trend toward “personalized politics,” wherein activists see the individual as the “locus of political responsibility and efficacy” rather than the community (Lichterman 1996:34). People who take this personalized approach view commitment as adherence to a set of values, not a specific social group or organization. In personalized politics, the roles people fulfill in movements are important to their identities only to the extent that the roles allow them to express and act upon their individual value commitments (Lichterman 1996; King 2004). Such an individual-focused approach is common among participants in internet-based movement organizations, who are usually physically isolated from one another and spread across vast geographical distances (Earl and Schussman 2003; Shumate and Pike 2006; Stoecker 2002; Wall 2007).

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

I also explore how organizational identity is shaped through a social movement organization’s interactions with antagonistic groups and news outlets. This process of identity

framing has generally been studied under the conceptual umbrella of collective identity (for a review, see Polletta and Jasper 2001). Taylor and Whittier (1992:105) defined collective identity as “the shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences, and solidarity.” In short, it is the sense of “we” that develops among movement participants. This sense of togetherness is based upon distinction from an out-group, consciousness of group members’ common interests and struggles, and negotiation of the meaning of the collective identity among movement participants and between the movement and outsiders (Groch 1994; Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Melucci 1989, 1996; Taylor and Whittier 1992).

It is this negotiated construction of collective identity that is of most interest to me. In particular, I am interested in the strategic framing of identity in the context of a movement organization’s relationship to antagonists and news outlets. These groups compete for interpretive dominance on what Hunt, Benford, and Snow (1994) referred to as “identity fields.” Identity fields include organizations that are allied with a social movement group, organizations that are antagonistic, and various audiences that are relatively neutral in relation to the movement’s goals. Social movement organizations strategically frame their collective identities to appeal to these audiences, and revise these identity frames on the basis of reactions from audience members and antagonists (Bernstein 1997; Einwohner 2002, 2006; Jasper 1997; Simi and Futrell 2009). Movement leaders may frame collective identities more conservatively when they rely upon powerful mainstream institutions for resources (Gamson 1996). In such circumstances, collective identity is framed through a top-down, managerial process that is similar to corporate branding and marketing (Dacin and Brown 2006; Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield 1994; Smith 2001). If a movement organization is unable to exert sufficient influence over how it is framed in the public eye, it can “lose ownership” over its collective identity and be

framed negatively by opponents and news outlets (Adair 1996).

Researchers have typically characterized the relationship between social movement organizations and the news media as symbiotic, in that movements need the media to publicize their issues and actions, and the media need conflict and action to fill their news reports (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Gitlin 1980; Molotch 1988). However, these studies have focused overwhelmingly on how a movement's *issues* are framed by the media, rather than examining how the media frames its *identity*. I bring together research on collective identity and media-movement dynamics to analyze the media's role in framing MoveOn's organizational identity. Organizational identity was originally defined by Albert and Whetten (1985) as consisting of the features seen as the central, enduring, and distinctive elements of the organization. Unfortunately, Albert and Whetten did not specify whether organizational identity was defined by outsiders' or insiders' perceptions of these features, so organization studies scholars have spent the last quarter century refining this concept. These researchers tend to portray organizational identity construction as "a process of reciprocal sensemaking" (Ginzel, Kramer, and Sutton 2004) between organizational members, leaders, and audiences (Brown, Dacin, Pratt, and Whetten 2006; Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Elsbach and Kramer 2004; Hatch and Schultz 1997, 2002). As would be expected, this research draws heavily on symbolic interactionism.

Brown et al. (2006), for example, build off of Cooley's (1902) "looking-glass self" in describing the relationship between organizational identity, image, and reputation. In their analysis, organizational leaders convey a favorable "intended image" to stakeholders and other outsiders, and then adjust organizational identity frames on the basis of public response to this conveyed image. Likewise, Hatch and Schultz (1997, 2000, 2002) adapt Mead's ([1934] 1962)

“I” and “Me” to the construction of organizational identity. They explain that organizational identity is defined through “a dynamic set of processes by which an organization’s self is continually socially constructed from the interchange between internal and external definitions of the organization” (Hatch and Schultz 2002:1004). In Chapter Six, I use the insights of this symbolic interactionist work on organizational identity framing to trace the dynamic processes by which MoveOn’s organizational identity is framed and reframed by various news outlets. I focus on organizational identity instead of collective identity because I found in my research that competing public definitions of MoveOn usually revolved around the symbolic value of the organization itself, not the characteristics of its members.

FRAMING AND THE NEWS MEDIA

MoveOn also relied upon the news media to convey its messages about issues to the public. This process involves issue framing on the part of both the social movement organization and the news outlets covering its issues. Research on social movement framing is rooted in Goffman’s (1974) discussion of frames as cognitive lenses of interpretation. Early works on framing took this cognitive approach, focusing on, for example, how the development of an “injustice frame” preceded decisions to participate in collective action (Gamson 1992). Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) expanded this approach into an analysis of how social movements convinced individuals that their interests and values were congruent with the movement’s goals. Snow and Benford (1992:137) defined a frame as “an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there,’” again emphasizing the *cognitive structure* of a frame rather than the *interpretive process* of framing.

In time, though, scholarly attention shifted to framing processes. Framing involves the construction of “interpretive schema” that are designed to accomplish three goals: diagnosis of

the problem and its cause; prognosis of what could happen and what actions need to be undertaken to solve the problem; and motivation of movement adherents and the public to actually take remedial action (Snow and Benford 1988). Decisions about how best to frame an issue are made in the context of a “discursive field,” the set of individuals and groups that are making claims about a given issue at a particular time (Steinberg 1998; Snow 2006). Frames are adapted in relation to claims made by challengers, actions undertaken by the movement, outside events that change the credibility of certain claims, the audience(s) targeted by the messages, and the response of the audience(s) to the movement’s frames (Benford and Hunt 2003; Ellingson 1995; Evans 1997; Kubal 1998; McCammon, Hewitt, and Smith 2004).

Movement organizations enter into “framing contests” (Ryan 1991) in which they try to advance their arguments about issues in the face of competing arguments from countermovements and official (often government) accounts. This contest is especially tricky because mainstream news outlets tend to grant more validity to official frames, which often contradict a movement’s frames and simultaneously portray the movement as extremist or marginal (Gitlin 1980; Ryan 1991). To increase the likelihood of chances of favorable coverage, social movement organizations frame issues in ways that correspond to “news values,” including conflict, drama, newness, and emphasis on extreme cases or severe consequences (Rucht 2004). They also build off of “culturally resonant” story lines, such as rags to riches tales, hero/villain dichotomies, or standing up for “American values” (liberty, freedom, individual rights, etc.) (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; McCarthy 1994; Ryan 1991). These frames make a movement’s argument more understandable to outsiders and cater to news outlets’ desire for conflict, thus increasing the chance that the movement’s issue frames will be reported by news outlets (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson 1992; Molotch 1988; Ryan

1991).

Movement organizations must also pay attention the “issue attention cycle” (Downs 1972). The issue attention cycle includes five phases: first, an issue rises to public awareness; next, the public becomes alarmed and tries to solve the problem; third, the complexity of the problem frustrates and discourages the public; fourth, the issue recedes from public attention; and finally, it is replaced by another issue and the cycle starts over. Movements can most effectively influence this cycle either by bringing issues to public attention in the first place, or by framing problems and solutions in ways that inspire public action while the issue is still prominent. This ability to influence the issue attention cycle is a critical aspect of social movement framing, because it maximizes a movement’s chances to affect public opinion and policy decisions, and also provides a window of opportunity for recruitment (Gitlin 1980). To seize this opportunity, movements select tactics that catch media attention and thereby give them a chance to spread their preferred issue frames (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). Media coverage increases when protests are large, organized by local activists, located close to news outlets or on a reporter’s “beat,” involve conflict, and occur on significant dates (e.g., September 11th) or at times of the day when news outlets were looking to fill “newsholes” (i.e., before the evening news) (McCarthy, McPhail and Smith 1996; Oliver and Myers 1999; Rucht 2004). However, overreliance on confrontational and/or illegal tactics tends to result in negative media coverage, in which the protesters are portrayed as villains (Gitlin 1980; Kruse 2001).

In this study, I focus on how MoveOn approached offline protest as a dramaturgical performance, and show how each “media event,” as MoveOn referred to offline actions, was a carefully orchestrated attempt to maximize favorable media coverage at the most opportune moment in the issue attention cycle, when an issue was first entering public attention. I show

how issue framing occurred both in the messages displayed at these events and through the “presentation of self” (Goffman 1959) that was implicit in MoveOn’s choice of tactics.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT OUTCOMES

Ultimately, the purpose of these protest events and, indeed, every action taken by a social movement organization is to successfully influence public opinion and government policies. Traditionally, social movement success was defined in terms of “collective goods,” the extent to which a movement brought forth benefits for the social group it claimed to represent. These collective goods were originally defined in economic terms (Olson 1965), but over time other benefits, such as legitimate access to the political process, were included under the umbrella of collective goods. Gamson ([1975] 1990), for example, defined success as the achievement of “new advantages,” such as passage and enforcement of legislation, and “acceptance,” in which government leaders recognized a movement organization as a legitimate representative for an aggrieved constituency. This study greatly influenced the direction of scholarly analysis of social movement success, which is still overwhelmingly concerned with political outcomes of protest.

More recent studies have focused on outcomes ranging from broad changes in political access to passage of specific policies (for a review, see Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, and Su 2010). Broad changes in access include granting women the right to vote (Banaszak 1996), and extending fundamental civil and voting rights to African-Americans (McAdam 1999). More often, movements push for mid-level policy outcomes that affect rights or legal protections for certain groups, but do not fundamentally change who is enfranchised. Examples of such mid-level policy outcomes include protection of women’s rights to legal and safe abortions (Staggenborg 1991), decriminalization of sodomy (Kane 2003), and state-level bans on same-sex marriage (Fleischmann and Moyer 2009). Low-level policy changes affect only one

circumscribed group, such as homeless people (Cress and Snow 2000), and are often offered by authorities as concessions to mollify the protesting group (Piven and Cloward 1977). MoveOn tends to focus on mid-level policy changes, ranging from universal health care to increased federal funding of alternative energy research and development.

Along with policy outcomes, MoveOn has worked to elect movement allies to positions of power in the United States government. By helping these people get elected, the hope is that they will advance the progressive movement's issues out of both personal commitment to the issues and a sense of obligation to those who helped them get elected. Movements ranging from the civil rights movement (Andrews 2001; McAdam 1999) to the Christian Right (Lichtman 2008) have pursued such an approach. It assumes a "political mediation" model of movement effectiveness, which proposes that movements are *indirectly* effective in politics through the ways they influence electoral outcomes (Amenta and Caren 2004; Amenta et al. 2010). This influence can be exerted by engaging in disruptive protests during election season, thereby bringing issues to public attention and forcing candidates to take positions on these issues (Piven and Cloward 1977; Fording 2001). It may also be exerted more directly, by organizing movement activists to work for ideologically allied candidates or, similarly, to mobilize against ideological opponents (Amenta, Caren, and Olasky 2005; Skocpol 2003). MoveOn has engaged in both styles of electoral activism in order to elect ideological allies and exert mediated influence on political decisions.

Research on movement outcomes has been dominated by analyses of policy and elections. Earl (2004), however, argues that movements' attempts to shape public opinion and media narratives should also be examined as indicators of success in their own right, rather than steps on the pathway to policy or electoral success. Indeed, successful injection of preferred issue

frames into media narratives about an issue can shift public opinion toward a movement's position (Gitlin 1980; Ryan 1991). Media messaging outcomes have been neglected as foci for evaluating success, but I attempt to redress this omission in Chapter Eight by examining MoveOn's deliberate attempts to shape media coverage of its issues.

Lastly, some researchers examine the consequences movements have for one another (Whittier 2004). In general, these consequences fall into three categories: spillover effects, spin-off effects, and movement/countermovement effects. Movement spillover occurs when an "early riser" movement establishes organizational structures, issue frames, collective identities, tactics, and even ideologies that influence later movements (Meyer and Whittier 1994). A common example of spillover is the civil rights movement's establishment of a *rights* "master frame" (Snow and Benford 1992) and a non-violent civil disobedience approach that influenced the framing and tactics of many other movements during the 1960s and 1970s (McAdam 1986). Spin-off effects occur when members of a movement feel that their concerns are not being sufficiently addressed within the confines of that movement, and break off to create a new movement that directly addresses their concerns (McAdam 1995). The feminist and gay rights movements, for example, were fed at least in part by angry rejections of the misogynistic and homophobic atmosphere that permeated the male-dominated organizations of the New Left (D'Emilio 1983; Minkoff 1997). Finally, movements that experience some success and public exposure can inspire countermovements that hope to prevent or reverse changes supported by the original movement. Movements and countermovements often contribute to each other's growth, as people feel compelled to choose sides and experience a greater sense of solidarity while under attack (Lo 1982; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Mottl 1980; Zald and Useem 1987). In Chapter Eight, I discuss how each of these social movement outcomes has played out over MoveOn's

history.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In the chapters that follow, I give an insider's account of participation in MoveOn, and explore the organization's relationship to the media, to other movement groups, and to the electoral and legislative processes. In Chapter Two, I review MoveOn's history, political philosophy, and organizational structure. This chapter provides a foundation of understanding that informs all other chapters. Chapter Three is dedicated to discussion of my methods of data collection and analysis. In Chapter Four, I describe how MoveOn attempted to create a sense of community among members through the rhetoric in its e-mails, and explore whether members actually felt a sense of connection to one another. Chapter Five expands upon my analysis of members' experiences in MoveOn by showing how participation led to activist identity development among some members, and allowed others to reinforce existing activist identities. Chapter Six focuses on how MoveOn's organizational identity was framed and reframed by competing news outlets. In Chapter Seven, I trace the dramaturgical processes by which MoveOn's offline actions were scripted and staged in order to convey specific messages to the news media during strategic moments in the issue attention cycle. The last substantive chapter, Chapter Eight, includes analyses of MoveOn's effectiveness in influencing policy outcomes, elections, media narratives about issues, and models of online political activism. Finally, in Chapter Nine I explain the theoretical significance of my research.

CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING MOVEON IN CONTEXT

MoveOn cannot be truly understood without examining the historical context in which it emerged, and the political and organizational philosophies that underlie its actions. This chapter first describes the history and philosophy behind MoveOn, and then provides an overview of the organization and its members. This background information sets the foundation for later chapters by explaining MoveOn's emergence and clarifying terminology used throughout this text.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR MOVEON'S EMERGENCE

Four moments in American political history are particularly relevant in setting the context for MoveOn's emergence: the Progressive era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the civil rights and New Left movements in the 1960s, the consequent conservative backlash in the 1970s and 1980s, and finally the emergence of the progressive "netroots" in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

For roughly thirty years beginning around 1890, a group of social activists took it upon themselves to improve the conditions of the urban poor in the United States. Calling themselves "Progressives²," this group of highly educated and relatively wealthy citizens sympathized with the plight of the workers who immigrated to Northern cities after the Civil War. These workers endured long hours in dangerous factories, and lived in rundown tenement buildings that lacked basic sanitation. Often motivated by a sense of Christian duty, Progressives fought to improve the lives of workers and their families. Muckraking progressive journalists uncovered the exploitation and corruption of many industries with exposés like Upton Sinclair's (1906) account

² I capitalize "Progressive" here to distinguish the Nineteenth Century movement from the current "progressive" movement, of which MoveOn is a part.

of the Chicago meatpacking plants, *The Jungle*. Physicians tried to eradicate diseases and lobbied for clean drinking water, and educators opened more public schools so poor children could have access to education. Progressives also set up “settlement houses” in poor communities, such as Hull House in Chicago, where they provided free education and many other services for the poor (Link and McCormick 1983). Over its thirty years of existence, the Progressive movement helped pass labor laws protecting women and children, developed some of the first citizen-run interest groups in the nation, and lobbied alongside the suffrage movement to give women the right to vote (Link and McCormick 1983).

The current progressive movement not only shares a name with the earlier Progressive movement; it also shares a fundamental worldview. Like the earlier movement, today’s progressives believe that those who have the privilege of education and relative wealth should use these assets to improve the lives of the less fortunate. The current progressive movement is largely populated by well-educated white middle-class Americans, but these people direct their energies toward issues that are of concern to a majority of Americans, such as access to affordable health care or ending the Iraq war. While the current iteration of the progressive movement focuses more on partisan politics and certain “pet” issues like clean energy that are frequently advocated for by middle-class social movements (Melucci 1989), it nonetheless shares the earlier movement’s emphasis on expanding rights and freedoms to disadvantaged groups. Perhaps most importantly, the current progressive movement shares the underlying belief that social progress is achievable through a combination of grassroots efforts to uplift disempowered groups and coordinated lobbying for policy changes at the national level. This dual-pronged approach is still very much evident in today’s progressive movement.

THE RISE OF THE NEW LEFT

During the period between the Progressive era and the civil rights movement, labor unions were at the forefront of mobilization on the left. Unions demanded greater protections and compensation for workers, but did not focus on advancing the rights of the entire citizenry. To the extent that a more fundamental critique existed, it was based upon a Marxist philosophy that challenged the unequal power structure inherent to industrial capitalism. This critique rang true for many industrial laborers, but failed to appeal broadly to middle-class Americans, who were reluctant to criticize a capitalist system from which they benefitted. Movements that called for the expansion of human and civil rights through political reforms rather than revolutionary action appealed much more to this segment of the population (Eder 1985; Kriesi 1989).

Whether intentionally or not, the civil rights movement appealed to the sensibilities of these middle-class Americans. It called upon Americans to uphold the fundamental rights promised in our founding documents, and framed racism as a betrayal of the nation's basic principles. This appeal to rights inspired thousands of idealistic young people, both black and white, to participate in the movement. Many of these newly minted activists were college students who grew up in idyllic suburban neighborhoods while the dark cloud of impending nuclear war hung overhead. They rejected the pro-Communist sentiments of many of their parents, but were similarly revolted by the venomous anti-Communism of people like Senator Joseph McCarthy. Many were inspired by President John F. Kennedy's call to "a new generation of Americans" to "ask what you can do for your country" (Gitlin 1987; Kennedy 1961). Through their participation in the civil rights movement, these young people learned the philosophy and practice of non-violent civil disobedience, which they brought back to communities and campuses across the country (McAdam 1999).

From this newfound political consciousness sprouted an assortment of youth-driven social

movements, which I refer to for brevity's sake as New Left movements. The term "New Left" was coined by the Students for a Democratic Society to distinguish the emerging pro-democracy left from the pro-Communist Old Left (Gitlin 1987). The New Left advocated "participatory democracy," the principle that the informed citizenry of the United States should get involved in the shaping of public policy at all levels (Gitlin 1987; O'Neill 2001). Through direct action tactics—at first non-violent and, later, more militant—the New Left opposed America's militaristic foreign policy, consumer culture, racism, sexism, homophobia, and other issues (D'Emilio 1983; Freeman 1973; Gitlin 1987).

Over time, the New Left began to fracture. Radical groups like the Weathermen advocated militant revolution, while more moderate elements called for non-violent reform. The militant groups eventually self-destructed under the weight of paranoia and increasingly strident demands for ideological purity, or were systematically undermined through federal counterintelligence programs (Ayers 2001; Gitlin 1987). By the mid-1970s, the remaining moderate groups transformed into institutionalized lobbying organizations that shied away from structural critiques of capitalism in favor of advocacy for single issues like abortion. They also replaced direct action and participatory democracy with insider lobbying tactics and a "paper membership" that was asked to do little more than respond to mass-mailed donation solicitations (Skocpol 2003).

MoveOn and other progressive organizations looked to these groups for inspiration, both positive and negative. On the positive side, MoveOn adapted the mass-mailed donation solicitation model to the internet, where it has proven to be even more effective. Likewise, MoveOn is similarly motivated by a desire for reform rather than revolution, and leverages its large membership to lobby politicians at the national level. On the other hand, MoveOn has

consciously and consistently created opportunities for its members to actively participate in this process, both online and offline. Moreover, MoveOn positions itself as a multi-issue organization to counter the tendency among progressive groups to become balkanized by single-issue concerns. Nonetheless, without the lifelong activists and reform-minded lobbying organizations that emerged from the New Left movement, MoveOn would not have had an experienced activist base from which to recruit or an organizational model to adapt for its purposes.

THE CONSERVATIVE BACKLASH

In some ways, the conservative “countermovement” that arose in response to the New Left was even more important to MoveOn’s emergence (Lo 1982; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Mottl 1980; Zald and Useem 1987). This countermovement developed in the aftermath of the 1964 presidential election, in which Lyndon Johnson overwhelmingly defeated Republican candidate Barry Goldwater (Lichtman 2008; Lux 2009). After this landslide, conservatives decided that they would regain power by capitalizing on white Americans’ fears of racial integration and moderates’ concerns about the anti-war and hippie movements. Conservatives adopted a strategy to persuade “Dixie Democrats” to vote Republican by abandoning efforts to recruit Black voters and stoking fears that the civil rights movement would lead to increased Black-on-White violence. In 1968, Richard Nixon successfully appealed to moderates and conservatives by running on a “law and order” platform that portrayed New Left activists as Communists and criminals (Lichtman 2008).

Concurrent with this resurgent Republican political power was the rise of the Christian Right. Anti-abortion activists mobilized in the wake of the *Roe vs. Wade* decision legalizing abortion in 1972, and “pro-family” organizations led by Phyllis Schlafly, Anita Bryant, and James Dobson opposed the Equal Rights Amendment, homosexuality, and abortion (Hopkins

and Reicher 1997; Lichtman 2008; McCaffrey and Keys 2000; Vanderford 1989). At the same time, Christian organizations like the Moral Majority injected religious arguments into political debates, and encouraged ministers to use the pulpit as a political platform (Lichtman 2008).

These groups found their political messiah in Ronald Reagan, who vocally opposed the New Left movements during his tenure as governor of California. His avowed Christianity and anti-abortion stance made him a hero to social conservatives, while his business-friendly, “trickle-down” theory of economics appealed to fiscal conservatives (Lichtman 2008; Lux 2009). This mixture of social and fiscal conservatism set the tone for the conservative movement for the following decades.

In the 1990s, conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich became the new leaders of the movement. Limbaugh’s radio show reached twenty million listeners per week by the mid-1990s, and Reagan declared him “the number one voice for conservatism in our country” (Lichtman 2008:389). Gingrich led the conservative movement from within the Republican Party, most notably by leading the development of the “Contract With America,” which pledged to lower taxes, reform welfare, and impose tougher crime laws. This led to the “Republican Revolution” of 1994, when Republicans gained sixty-two seats in Congress, mostly in the South. Gingrich also spurred on the investigations that eventually led to the Clinton impeachment hearings of 1998 and 1999 (Lichtman 2008).

Twenty years after its initial victory with Ronald Reagan, the conservative movement returned to the White House in 2000 with the election of George W. Bush. Bush represented the culmination of the movement’s efforts: as an evangelical Christian and a pro-business economic conservative, he opposed to abortion, gay marriage, and other such issues, while favoring financial deregulation and tax cuts for the wealthy. Following 9/11, his doctrine of pre-emptive,

unilateral military strikes and support for increased domestic intelligence gathering under the Patriot Act appealed to conservative “hawks” who rallied under the banner of the “War on Terror” (Lichtman 2008).

Of course, Bush’s actions incensed progressives, many of whom had become complacent during the Clinton years. The increasingly polarized political atmosphere led to hatred and distrust on both ends of the political spectrum, but it also fueled voter turnout and campaign volunteering among both party loyalists and movement activists (Dodson 2010; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006). In fact, the conservative rise to power directly led to the formation of MoveOn, in that (as I will discuss later) MoveOn was originally created in response to congressional efforts to impeach President Clinton. MoveOn thrived in the increasingly polarized political atmosphere, and pioneered new ways to channel progressives’ anger into online and offline activism.

THE PROGRESSIVE “NETROOTS” MOVEMENT

The term “netroots” was coined by progressive blogger Jerome Armstrong in 2002, in reference to the progressive online activist community (Armstrong and Zuniga 2006). Armstrong’s blog, MyDD, was an early leader in the progressive blogosphere, along with Markos Moulitsas Zuniga’s Daily Kos, which became the leading progressive blog by the mid-2000s (Armstrong and Zuniga 2006; Bai 2007a). The netroots are comprised of a loosely connected network of political bloggers and online activist organizations that provide political commentary and opportunities for ordinary citizens to get involved in activism. Although the term originally referred to progressive online activism, with the rise of the right-wing blogosphere and internet-based activist organizations that (as I discuss in Chapter Eight) mimic MoveOn’s model of online activism, the netroots now include voices from across the political

spectrum. For my purposes, though, I focus here only on the progressive netroots.

Through blogs, progressives inform themselves about the hot issues of the moment and share their opinions in an environment that is supportive but also intellectually challenging. This helps them deepen their understanding and come to some informal agreement about appropriate ways to frame issues. Meanwhile, online activist organizations like MoveOn give people—indeed, many of the same people—opportunities to engage in activism. Quick and easy forms of activism, such as online petitions or donations, are nearly omnipresent. These organizations also use the internet to mobilize people for offline events like candlelight vigils and grassroots campaign work for Democratic candidates (Armstrong and Zuniga 2006). The progressive netroots serve as a “virtual clubhouse” (Bai 2007a) where like-minded people can connect despite being physically separated (Kerbel 2009). Until the internet provided the tools with which to form online progressive communities, many people endured under a cloud of perceived ideological isolation (Postmes and Brunsting 2002). By facilitating interaction and dialogue between progressives during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the netroots emboldened the movement at a time when public dissent from the president’s pro-war agenda was seen as unpatriotic (Armstrong and Zuniga 2006; Kerbel 2009).

MOVEON’S POLITICAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

MoveOn’s underlying political and organizational philosophies reflected its status as a leader of the progressive netroots. Its approach to politics emphasized reform-oriented grassroots activism that was issue-focused rather than exclusively partisan in nature. Moreover, MoveOn’s organizational philosophy was deeply influenced by the decentralized, multivocal structure of the internet.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: PRAGMATIC PROGRESSIVISM

MoveOn's approach to activism was based on a philosophy I refer to as *pragmatic progressivism*³. Pragmatism is a distinctly American philosophy that judges the value of ideas by how successfully they can be implemented in the real world. Thus, a pragmatic approach to politics would judge the value of a political idea by how it could actually be implemented to improve citizens' daily lives, not by some sense of intrinsic value located in the idea itself (Feffer 1993). For example, pragmatists would argue that a law that sets a timetable for withdrawal of American troops from Iraq is ultimately more valuable than adherence to general proclamations about the need for world peace, because it puts forth an implementable plan of action, not merely an idealistic principle. Early pragmatists like William James and George Herbert Mead, were connected to the first Progressive movement and, of course, developed foundational social psychological analyses that inspired the development of symbolic interactionism. The Progressive movement found in pragmatists a shared affinity for empirically grounded knowledge, and likewise believed that philosophical truisms about the inherent value of each human life were only useful if they oriented peoples' actions toward improving the lives of those around them (Feffer 1993).

As I mentioned above, the current progressive movement is inspired in part by the earlier Progressives' efforts to use knowledge to help the downtrodden in the face of corporate dominance and government corruption. At the same time, progressives learned from the dissolution of the New Left movements that taking ideological stances without developing pragmatic strategies for implementing changes will eventually fracture a social movement (Ayers 2001; Gitlin 1987; O'Neill 2001). Indeed, several of the veteran activists I met in MoveOn experienced this ideological fragmentation as young activists in the 1960s, and did not

³ The term "pragmatic progressivism" is not an entirely new creation on my part, although to my knowledge I am the first to apply it to MoveOn. It has also been used to describe President Obama's combination of progressive ideals and willingness to negotiate compromises that will ultimately be signed into law (Crauderueff 2009).

want to see the same thing happen to the progressive movement. One such veteran activist epitomized pragmatic progressivism when he described his participation in MoveOn as an attempt “to find a way of being practical without ceasing to be radical.” As I discovered through my participant observation, this balance of progressive principles and pragmatic political strategizing appealed to two groups: movement activists who were tired of being ideologically pure but politically ineffective, and Democrats who had become increasingly disenchanted with trying to bring about change through the party apparatus.

Progressives believe that “society works well only when it has a sense of community, an understanding that we are all interdependent on one another,... and that we look out for those who can’t take care of themselves” (Lux 2009:3-4). They view the government as a nurturing parent who should provide equal care and opportunities for all of its children (Lakoff 2004). In practice, this translates into support for universal health care, investment in education, environmental protection, withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, protection of civil liberties, and increased oversight of banks and corporations (Congressional Progressive Caucus 2005; Lakoff 2004). More specifically, MoveOn’s agenda focused on ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, advocating for universal health care, supporting clean and renewable energies, and developing an economic recovery plan that helped the unemployed and held bankers accountable for unethical practices (MoveOn.org 2008a, 2009a). To achieve these goals, MoveOn supported policies that aligned with progressive principles *and* had a realistic chance of passing. As one field organizer told me, MoveOn’s approach was to “not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.” This phrase captures the essence of pragmatic progressivism: taking principled positions, but also being willing to make certain concessions to get bills passed that at least moved the country in the right direction.

The current incarnation of the progressive movement has been tempered by lessons learned through the dissolution of ideologically rigid social movements, and has likewise been shaped by the reality of a strong conservative countermovement that has restricted the progressive movement's ability to translate principled political positions into national policies. In short, the progressive movement has adapted to the realities of its historical circumstances, and has attempted to make positive changes—or, at times, at least prevent further negative changes—given the “political opportunities” provided it (McAdam 1999).

ORGANIZATIONAL PHILOSOPHY: “THE MOVE ON WAY”

MoveOn outlined its approach to political organizing in a document entitled “The MoveOn Way” which, in combination with observations from my ethnographic experience, forms the basis for all statements made about MoveOn's organizational philosophy in this section (MoveOn.org 2009b). In this unsigned document, MoveOn described itself as “an experiment in radical decentralization.” MoveOn's founders intentionally designed it as a virtual organization with no physical headquarters, unlike most political organizations that have headquarters in Washington, D.C. Staff members were even required to work in separate places if they lived in the same city. This model avoided “power centers,” where a few leaders dictated the organization's path, in order to establish a more democratic, non-hierarchical leadership structure in which any staff member could propose an issue campaign. Furthermore, by “embedding” staff in communities like journalists embedded with troops at war, MoveOn believed that its staff kept in touch with the concerns of ordinary citizens.

This concern for remaining connected to everyday life reflected MoveOn's view of its members as intelligent and resourceful individuals who were capable of making good decisions, given adequate information and opportunities to act. MoveOn saw itself as simply “providing an

important service to citizens who are trying to figure out how to be politically effective.” This service orientation to political activism balanced a member-driven agenda with staff-level strategic decision making. Members voted each year on MoveOn’s agenda, and were frequently contacted for feedback about issues or recent events. Staff members planned MoveOn’s overall strategy, and decided which tactics would be used to advocate for each issue. For major campaigns, like a get-out-the-vote program or its anti-war efforts, MoveOn’s board of directors and staff would “meet” (usually via phone and/or computer) to develop its long-term strategic vision. Staff members also made strategic decisions on the fly when sudden events, like the death of a political leader or a natural disaster, changed the nation’s priorities. MoveOn’s balanced approach to political organizing was based on the belief that “good leadership must develop a sense of mission and strategy, but be grounded in a real, on-going, two-way relationship with constituents.”

Lastly, MoveOn maintained a “nimble” organizational model that allowed it to work efficiently with minimal overhead costs. Its staff grew from five members in 2003 to approximately thirty by the end of the decade, which was still relatively small for a group that represented over five million people and frequently raised millions of dollars. It also relied upon volunteers to maintain its website and to run many aspects of the council system. When necessary, MoveOn contracted with other organizations on a campaign-by-campaign basis to do jobs it could not do using only hired staff. To create television advertisements, for example, it used a progressive-leaning media corporation called Fenton Communications, and to run the MoveOn council field operation it used field organizers from Grassroots Campaigns, Incorporated. By keeping itself nimble in this way, MoveOn was able to respond quickly to the changing political scene while ensuring that most of its members’ contributions went toward

issues and candidates that they supported.

THE MOVEON STORY

In some ways, MoveOn's founders set out with these political and organizational philosophies in mind when they began the organization. However, at that time they could not have anticipated that MoveOn would become one of the most influential and innovative organizations in a renewed progressive movement. To show how this transformation occurred and give some historical context for my research, I will outline the major events that have defined MoveOn.

“CENSURE AND MOVE ON”

Wes Boyd and Joan Blades, the Berkeley, California, couple who started MoveOn, were not particularly political: Blades was an artist and lawyer, while Boyd was a computer whiz who founded a software company with Blades called Berkeley Systems. They sold this company, best known for its “flying toasters” screensaver and the “You Don't Know Jack” computer quiz game, for \$13.8 million in 1997, and were looking for a new venture by the fall of 1998 (Burrell 2003; Hurowitz 2007; Jacobson 2003).

Over lunch at a Berkeley Chinese restaurant, Boyd and Blades talked about their frustration with Congress's seeming obsession with the lurid details of President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. Boyd and Blades wanted Congress to get back to work on issues that actually affected Americans' daily lives, and decided ordinary people needed a way to tell Congress to get back to work (Jordanov and Stevenson 2009). They developed a simple one-sentence e-mail telling Congress to “censure Bill Clinton and move on to more pressing issues facing the nation,” and forwarded it to a few friends on September 22, 1998 (Jordanov and Stevenson 2009; MoveOn.org 2008a). Over the next week, Boyd and Blades launched a website and registered

MoveOn with the Federal Election Commission, deciding at the last minute to change the name from “Censure and Move On” (Federal Election Commission 1998). Their petition received 100,000 “signatures” (names added to the bottom of the message) by the end of this first week, and eventually hit 350,000 by December of 1998 (Hurowitz 2007; Lyman 1998). Wisely, the couple kept track of the names and e-mail addresses of the petition signers.

Although there were at least thirty websites dedicated to opposing Clinton’s impeachment in late 1998, MoveOn quickly distinguished itself by using its e-mail list to mobilize people for online *and* offline activism (Lyman 1998). Less than one month after creating their first online petition, Boyd and Blades asked members to call congressional representatives and urge them to vote against impeachment. Members made 17,000 calls to Congress, and asked for more ways to get involved (Lyman 1998). In response, Boyd and Blades mobilized over 2,000 members in 226 congressional districts to deliver a total of 20,000 pages of petition signatures to their representatives (Brown 1998; Evangelista 1998). After the House of Representatives voted to impeach President Clinton, Boyd and Blades launched an online fundraising campaign in which 18,500 members pledged \$12.6 million and 850,000 volunteer hours to support candidates who ran against members of Congress who voted for impeachment (Healy 1999; Hurowitz 2007; Zetter 2004). After only three months in existence, MoveOn had already hit upon the combination of online and offline activism that would become its trademark.

DISCOVERING ITS MISSION

By the end of 1998, MoveOn had 500,000 members, but it did not have an overarching mission. The next two years were a period of trial and error for MoveOn. Some petition campaigns were moderately successful, such as a gun control petition that accumulated 70,000 signatures in the wake of the shooting at Columbine High School, but none of them matched the

performance of the original “censure and move on” petition (Hafner 1999). Perhaps most surprising was MoveOn’s silence during the controversial Florida vote recount and Supreme Court decision that followed the 2000 presidential election. Reflecting on this inaction, Boyd said, “We totally blew it. There was tremendous energy within our base, but we didn’t engage because I thought for sure that the system would work, that the wheels would turn and a fair result would be found. And I was wrong” (Goldberg 2003). Boyd and Blades had hit upon an effective model for internet-based political organizing, but their naiveté about how best to wield this powerful new tool was costing them members. In fact, by mid-2001 MoveOn’s membership had shrunk by half, and Boyd and Blades were seriously considering shutting down the organization (Hurowitz 2007; MoveOn.org 2008a).

Circumstances changed dramatically on September 11, 2001. In response to the terrorist attacks, Blades sent out a petition asking political leaders to “support justice, not escalating violence, which would only play into the terrorists’ hands” (York 2005:26). Like their earlier petition, this petition hit upon an exposed nerve in the American collective consciousness, and quickly received hundreds of thousands of signatures. Unbeknownst to Blades, a twenty-year-old recent college graduate in Boston named Eli Pariser had created a very similar online petition, asking international leaders to “use moderation and restraint in responding to the recent terrorist attacks” (Jordanov and Stevenson 2009). His petition accumulated an astounding 515,000 signatures from 192 countries in only two weeks (Bernhard 2004; Jordanov and Stevenson 2009). Peter Schurman, MoveOn’s executive director at the time, took notice of this success, and asked Pariser if he would like to join forces (and e-mail lists) with MoveOn (Harris 2001; Jordanov and Stevenson 2009). This merger gave MoveOn a much-needed shot in the arm, as it brought new members, new ideas, and a youthful enthusiasm to the organization.

Over the next couple of years, MoveOn's membership and influence grew as it became one of the most vocal opponents of President Bush's plan to invade Iraq. At the time, MoveOn was one of the few political organizations openly opposing Bush's doctrine of preemptive war, so it became a magnet for anti-war activists and progressives more generally. As people joined to express their opposition to the Bush administration, MoveOn's membership skyrocketed to 1.7 million by mid-2003, and reached 2.8 million by the end of 2004 (Jordanov and Stevenson 2009).

MoveOn organized several bold and innovative actions that received a lot of press attention. As part of the Win Without War coalition, it helped plan the largest single-day protest in history, in which millions of people participated in 6,000 events in 130 countries to oppose the invasion of Iraq (Boyd 2003; MoveOn.org 2008a). In addition, over one million people called and e-mailed Congress as part of MoveOn's "virtual march on Washington" in opposition to the Iraq war (MoveOn.org 2008a). Perhaps most innovative was MoveOn's "virtual primary" in March 2003, in which nearly 318,000 people cast online "votes" for Democratic presidential candidates (Hickey 2004). Howard Dean's victory in this online primary raised his public profile, and money and volunteers began to flood into his campaign (MoveOn.org 2008a). By the end of 2003, the combined successes of these events led one reporter to argue, "MoveOn has become the most important political advocacy group in Democratic circles—and arguably the most important in American politics" (Goldberg 2003).

TIPPING POINT

MoveOn reached what co-founder Wes Boyd referred to as "a tipping point" in 2004 when it organized a well-funded and multi-pronged strategy to prevent George W. Bush from getting re-elected (Jordanov and Stevenson 2009). As part of this plan, it created the MoveOn Voter

Fund, a “527” organization that could raise and spend unlimited sums of money to work for or against (but not with) political candidates. The Voter Fund received \$10 million in small donations and several large donations totaling \$5 million from George Soros, a Hungarian-born human rights activist, and Peter Lewis, the founder of Progressive Insurance (Hamm 2008; Zetter 2004). With this money, MoveOn began running anti-Bush ads, prompting the Republican establishment and Fox News Channel to malign MoveOn as an extremist group funded by a foreigner who hated America and wanted to bring down the president (Jordanov and Stevenson 2009).

As part of a contest called “Bush in 30 Seconds,” MoveOn asked members to create thirty-second advertisements about Bush. Out of 1,500 submissions, two videos compared Bush to Adolf Hitler, adding fuel to the claims that MoveOn was an extremist organization (Fouhy 2004; Hamm 2008). MoveOn’s winning ad, entitled “Child’s Pay,” depicted children working to pay off the nation’s one trillion dollar deficit (YouTube 2008). This ad received a great deal of coverage after CBS refused to air it during the 2004 Super Bowl (Karr 2004). This controversial decision resulted in countless free airings on the news, leading one political expert to suggest that the ad “achieved the most air time with the least dollars expended of any ad in the history of the republic” (MoveOn.org 2008a). The controversy also brought greater attention to MoveOn and swelled its ranks by 40,000 new members (Hamm 2008).

Throughout the summer and fall of 2004, MoveOn organized several ambitious offline actions. These included nationwide bake sales that raised \$750,000 for John Kerry, thousands of house parties where members pledged to see Michael Moore’s documentary, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and even a national concert tour called “Vote for Change” that traveled to battleground states to energize young voters (Brownstein 2004; Jordanov and Stevenson 2009; MoveOn.org 2008a).

The biggest element of MoveOn's 2004 election strategy was its get-out-the-vote program, "Leave No Voter Behind." This program was designed to turn out swing voters and infrequent Democratic voters (people who rarely voted but supported Democrats when they did) in seventeen battleground states.

With \$5 million in member donations, MoveOn hired five hundred field organizers from Grassroots Campaigns, Incorporated, a for-profit company that exclusively trained progressive political organizers. These organizers were placed in battleground states by late summer, only eight weeks after the program was proposed (Hurowitz 2007). The field organizers taught door-to-door voter outreach tactics to local MoveOn members, and trained them on MoveOn's online voter database, dubbed the "Web Action Center." Using this system, members downloaded contact information for targeted voters in their neighborhoods, scripts for communicating with voters, and informational flyers about John Kerry and George W. Bush. After contacting voters, members uploaded their results back into the system. In total, over 70,000 members (including myself) knocked on over six million doors and turned out over 500,000 Kerry voters in battleground states (MoveOn.org 2008a). Although Kerry lost the election, "Leave No Voter Behind" increased turnout among Kerry supporters in battleground states by nine percent over predicted turnout rates (Middleton and Green 2008).

By the end of the 2004 election season, MoveOn was undeniably one of the most powerful progressive organizations in the country. In total, MoveOn raised \$50 million in online contributions averaging less than \$75, spent \$40 million on political ads, and donated millions of dollars to congressional candidates and John Kerry (Jordanov and Stevenson 2009; Reilly 2004). As a recognized leader on the left, it had also become a primary target for derision and outright attacks by conservative political leaders and news commentators. Despite its high profile and

large membership, MoveOn's future was uncertain in light of Bush's re-election.

RECLAIMING CONGRESS

Almost immediately after the 2004 election, MoveOn members told organizational leaders that they wanted to focus on taking control of Congress in 2006 (MoveOn.org 2008a). However, this was not the only issue of concern to MoveOn between 2004 and 2006. MoveOn allied with other progressive groups to successfully oppose Bush's attempt to privatize Social Security, organized candlelight vigils to protest the Iraq war and memorialize those who were killed, and continued to mobilize members for online and offline actions of all sorts, including humanitarian efforts (MoveOn.org 2008a). When a tsunami killed hundreds of thousands of people in southeast Asia in December of 2004, members donated \$2.4 million to help survivors (Hurowitz 2007). Likewise, when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in 2005, MoveOn set up a website called HurricaneHousing.org where MoveOn members offered temporary housing to displaced residents. Within two weeks of the disaster, over 30,000 evacuees had been placed in housing through the program (Jordanov and Stevenson 2009).

Though these efforts were admirable, MoveOn's ultimate concern was to end Republican control of Congress. It strategically targeted "second-tier races," battles for seats that mainstream Democratic leaders believed were unwinnable. This forced Republicans to spend resources on races that they thought were safe, and prevented MoveOn from simply repeating the efforts of Democratic Party volunteers in a few key races. In May, MoveOn raised \$250,000 overnight and channeled thousands of volunteers into the campaign of Ned Lamont, an anti-war Democrat who was challenging Senator Joe Lieberman in the Connecticut primary (Holland 2006; Hurowitz 2007). Though he lost to Lieberman (who ran as an Independent) in the general election, Lamont's primary victory proved MoveOn was capable of influencing elections (Jordanov and

Stevenson 2009). This symbolic victory excited MoveOn's membership and served as "proof of concept" for its get-out-the-vote program, "Call for Change."

"Call for Change" was a "liquid phone banking" system that allowed members in non-competitive districts to call targeted voters in competitive districts (MoveOn.org 2006). MoveOn opened temporary phone banking offices, encouraged members to attend "calling parties," and set up an innovative online system that provided the names and phone numbers of targeted voters to members who wanted to make calls from home. This system utilized the full force of MoveOn's national membership by allowing members who otherwise would not have been able to volunteer for competitive races to pour their energy into districts where it was most needed. In total, MoveOn members made seven million phone calls into sixty-three competitive congressional districts. On Election Day, the activity was so intense that members were making at least forty calls *per second* (MoveOn.org 2008a). Although the effects of the "Call for Change" program were never systematically analyzed, it seems certain that the program contributed to the Democrats' resounding victory.

CONTROVERSY AND VICTORY

Without missing a beat, MoveOn launched into the presidential campaign. It planned a series of "virtual town hall meetings," where members met at house parties and watched Democratic presidential candidates field questions submitted by MoveOn members. The first virtual town hall focused on Iraq, while the second addressed candidate's plans for a green energy economy (MoveOn.org 2008a). A third town hall focusing on health care was planned for the fall, but was canceled after MoveOn's public image suffered from controversy surrounding an ad it placed in *The New York Times* on September 10, 2007.

The ad, headlined "General Petraeus or General Betray Us?," accused General David

Petraeus, then commander of troops in Iraq, of “cooking the books for the White House” by skewing statistics to make it appear that the situation in Iraq was improving (MoveOn.org 2007). Republican presidential candidates and members of Congress immediately demanded that Democrats denounce the ad and return funds they received from MoveOn (Bash, Preston, and Mooney 2007; TheWashingtonPost.com 2007). By the end of the month, both the House and Senate had voted to formally condemn the ad (Sanner 2007; Taylor 2007). Many MoveOn members donated millions of dollars in an unsolicited show of support (Jordanov and Stevenson 2009), while others unsubscribed from the e-mail list in protest. Recognizing that the controversy had divided its members and soiled its reputation, MoveOn chose to lay low for a while.

By early 2008, MoveOn was back in the game. In February, 70% of members voted to endorse Barack Obama as the Democratic presidential candidate (MoveOn.org 2008a). It ran another member-created ad contest, called “Obama in 30 Seconds,” and targeted John McCain with ads and events that framed him as a continuation of George W. Bush (MoveOn.org 2008a, b). MoveOn planned to combine the best aspects of “Leave No Voter Behind” and “Call for Change” in its 2008 get-out-the-vote program, but realized this effort would be redundant after seeing how Obama’s plan mimicked MoveOn’s online and offline organizing model (a point I discuss in more detail in Chapter Eight). It quickly switched gears and became a “recruitment engine” for Obama’s campaign. MoveOn asked members to volunteer for Obama and call other members to encourage them to do the same. In total, MoveOn recruited nearly one million volunteers who worked a total of 20.8 million hours for Obama. Members also donated over \$88 million to Obama’s campaign, and registered 500,000 young voters in battleground states (MoveOn.org 2008b).

THE OBAMA ERA

Obama's victory was sweet for MoveOn, but it also posed a challenge: could an organization that was built through opposition to President Bush continue to grow under a president whose agenda largely coincided with its own (Davis 2009)? As the Obama era dawned, MoveOn repositioned itself as a watchdog that would keep Obama and the Democrats in Congress accountable for the changes they promised. In the first two years of Obama's presidency, MoveOn lobbied hard for healthcare reform, and celebrated when Obama signed the reform bill in March of 2010 (3/26/10 e-mail)⁴. On the other hand, it criticized Obama's decisions to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan and to open up more of America's coastline to offshore oil drilling (12/1/09 and 4/2/10 e-mails). MoveOn also responded to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in the summer of 2010 by organizing vigils and asking members to call Congress demanding that the cost of the cleanup be covered by BP (6/5/10 and 6/1/10 e-mails).

MoveOn's 2010 get-out-the-vote program incorporated its "liquid phone banking" technology from 2006 with its focus on being a "recruitment engine" for existing Democratic grassroots volunteering efforts (9/7/10 e-mail). It recruited thousands of members to canvass for Democrats in competitive races, and singled out four "Progressive Heroes"—Senator Barbara Boxer, Senator Russ Feingold, Representative Alan Grayson, and Representative Tom Perriello—for extra donations and volunteers (9/15/10 e-mail). However, unlike the previous two elections, MoveOn did not have the tide of public opinion in its favor. Conservatives and moderates were increasingly critical of Democrats' attempts at health care reform, and approval ratings for Obama and Congress were slipping among even liberal Democrats (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2010). Moreover, the Tea Party movement had rallied

⁴ All referenced MoveOn e-mail messages are listed chronologically in the References section, after the alphabetically listed references.

conservative voters and successfully defeated several Republicans in the primaries. In the end, the Democrats lost control of the House of Representatives, and three of MoveOn's four "Progressive Heroes" (save Barbara Boxer) were defeated (11/3/10 e-mail).

Though MoveOn remained one of the leading progressive organizations and claimed five million members across all congressional districts (MoveOn.org 2011), this resounding defeat punched holes in the illusion that MoveOn and other netroots organizations were ushering in an era of progressive political dominance. In the wake of the 2010 election, MoveOn's status was uncertain: had it passed its peak of effectiveness and begun a slow slide toward irrelevance, or was it merely experiencing a minor speed bump in its continued progression toward ever-more innovative political uses for internet-based technologies?

"OPERATION DEMOCRACY": MOVEON'S COUNCIL SYSTEM

Underlying much of MoveOn's election work and other offline activism from 2005 onward was the MoveOn council system, which until the summer of 2008 was referred to as "Operation Democracy"⁵. This council system was central to my research, as it was the primary avenue for meeting other MoveOn members face-to-face, and it allowed me to advance to higher-level volunteer positions that opened up opportunities to interview members of MoveOn's staff. Because of its importance both to MoveOn's offline activism and my research, I will briefly describe the council system's emergence, organizational structure, and functionality.

Operation Democracy was rolled out in March 2005 to channel the energy of "Leave No Voter Behind" into an enduring local-level organizing structure. It was originally envisioned as a progressive countermobilization in response to Karl Rove's proclamation that the Republicans were initiating a "permanent campaign" in which the fundraising, volunteer activism, and issue

⁵ The name was changed to simply "MoveOn councils" in May 2008 because MoveOn's field directors realized that members were confused by the "Operation Democracy" moniker, and this made recruitment to the councils more difficult because people did not associate "Operation Democracy" with MoveOn (5/1/08 e-mail).

framing that normally took place during campaign season would be undertaken indefinitely (3/3/05 e-mail). As of 2008, MoveOn had approximately 200 councils across the country. An exact number of participants was unavailable, but one field organizer I interviewed estimated that no more than one percent of MoveOn members participated in councils. This translates to a maximum of 50,000 council members, though based on my experience reviewing councils as a regional coordinator, I suspect the actual number was closer to 25,000 listed members. Moreover, many people who were on the council rosters did not actually participate in actions. Taking this fact into account, I estimate the number of active council members was approximately 10,000 across the whole country, which means far less than one percent of MoveOn's reported five million members were responsible for organizing the vast majority of its offline actions. My experiences as a council member and regional coordinator, as well as interviews with staff and volunteers involved in the councils, form the basis for much of my knowledge of MoveOn's council system.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL HIERARCHY

Although MoveOn's overall organizational structure was inspired by the non-hierarchical network structure of the internet, it did exert considerable strategic control over the goals and tactics of online and offline activism. This top-down strategic control was readily apparent in the hierarchical organizational structure of MoveOn's council system. Only three MoveOn staffers ran the field operation: a field director, deputy field director, and behind-the-scenes tech guru who kept all of the online council tools working. They decided how to best utilize the councils to advance MoveOn's agenda each month, and developed all of the necessary tools to make this a reality.

Directly below them was a team of paid field organizers who relayed the strategic vision

and action plans to regional coordinators. From November 2005 to March 2009, approximately twenty field organizers worked on one- or two-year contracts from GCI. As of March 2009, MoveOn added twelve full-time field organizers to its staff to provide more long-term stability to its field operations. Field organizers were responsible for overseeing teams of five to seven “regional coordinators” (discussed below). Each week the organizers ran team conference calls as well as one-on-one “indy” calls with each regional coordinator. On these calls, they informed regional coordinators about MoveOn’s upcoming action plans, set weekly goals for recruitment and event organizing, and discussed the outcomes of events to assess what worked and what could be improved. Field organizers routinely worked sixty hours during a normal week and up to one hundred hours per week at the height of election season, even though they were only paid \$25,000-\$30,000 per year. The demands of the job and the low pay meant that only young, energetic, idealistic people without families took on the task.

As mentioned above, regional coordinators populated the next stratum in the council system. There were roughly seventy regional coordinators spread across the country during the time I held the position in 2008. Regional coordinators functioned like middle managers in the MoveOn council system: they were not involved in national-level strategic decision making, but were responsible for translating strategy into implementable actions at the local level. They were unpaid MoveOn members who helped build new councils, helped existing councils execute offline events, and recruited active members for leadership roles in the councils. Regional coordinators also held conference calls after each event to gather feedback from hosts and attendees, including suggestions for improvement that were relayed to MoveOn’s staff via the field organizers (MoveOn.org 2009c). Each regional coordinator oversaw roughly three to five councils that were often spread across multiple states (hence the “regional” part of regional

coordinating). To help recruit new council leaders, build new councils, and provide council leaders with contact information for members in their areas, regional coordinators had access to several online databases that included rich details about each member's previous types of participation. If I wanted to find someone who might be a good candidate to start a new council, for example, I could search for members by ZIP code and see the number of petition signatures, phone calls, and events that were attributable to each member. This system allowed regional coordinators to conduct targeted recruiting for council leaders, core members, and event hosts.

“Coordinating councils” populated the ground level of the council system. At the helm of each was the council coordinator, a local volunteer who spent twelve to fifteen hours per month (and often more, especially during election seasons) overseeing the running of the council. The council coordinator recruited and trained members of the council leadership team, found organizers for local events, and prepped and debriefed organizers before and after each event (MoveOn.org 2009d). Media and recruitment coordinators rounded out the council leadership team. The media coordinator contacted local reporters, sent out press advisories before each event, and functioned as spokesperson if reporters wanted a statement about the event (MoveOn.org 2009e). The recruitment coordinator contacted local MoveOn members to recruit them for events, and attempted to recruit new council members by asking event attendees to join the council (MoveOn.org 2009f). Beneath the leadership team was the council core, a group of committed members who supplemented the work of council leaders by occasionally hosting events, providing materials like candles or signs for events, and contacting the media or local MoveOn members (MoveOn.org 2009g).

COUNCILS OFFLINE AND ONLINE

Each council had an offline and online presence. Ideally, councils were supposed to hold

monthly meetings where leaders and core members discussed that month's action plan and delegated responsibilities for hosting, recruiting, contacting the media, and whatever else was necessary to make an event happen. In practice, meetings did not take place monthly, if at all. Council leaders and core members were often working at least part-time and/or going to school, and therefore were unable or unwilling to carve out an evening for these meetings. Instead, council leaders and occasionally one or two core members or event hosts held conference calls to plan events.

Even though a major part of the council strategy was to recruit new members by asking them to host events, in my experience well over half of all events were hosted by council leaders or core members. The rest were “pop-up” events hosted by people who were not members of the council. Council and regional coordinators encouraged these hosts to join or form a council, but most were one-time hosts. During my tenure as regional coordinator, I attempted to recruit several pop-up hosts for council leadership positions. However, once I explained the responsibilities and time commitment of these roles, these pop-up hosts either directly refused the roles or simply stopped responding to my e-mails and calls. This lack of stable council leadership and consistent event hosts meant that the week leading up to an event was usually a mad scramble to find hosts, get events posted online so nearby members could find them and RSVP, and call through lists of often well over one hundred local members to ensure people would show up at the event. This hectic pace frequently led to burnout and turnover among council leaders and core members.

The online component of the council system was much more organized. The main Operation Democracy website, for example, allowed members to search for councils near their ZIP codes, and provided extensive information about the function and organizational structure of

councils. For council coordinators and other leaders, the website provided step-by-step training guides for each leadership role, along with guides for leadership tasks like delegating responsibility and holding people accountable. Each council also had its own home page where members could check out upcoming events and contact other council members, either individually or as a group. The council page also provided links to materials pertaining to the current month's event, and an archive of materials from previous events. These materials included an explanation of MoveOn's positions on relevant issues, guidelines for making events successful, talking points and a media advisory template for framing the event's message, and signs and other materials for members to bring to the event. This wealth of materials made it easy for even the most inexperienced activists to hold successful events.

MOVEON MEMBERS

Because so much of my research focuses on members' experiences, it is important to briefly describe MoveOn members demographically and to provide a typology of participation. Despite keeping detailed data on members' levels of activity and issues of interest, MoveOn had no statistical data on members' demographic characteristics. I therefore relied upon ethnographic observation and several other data sources to create a composite sketch of MoveOn's membership base.

MEMBER DEMOGRAPHICS

During my four years of participant observation, most of the members I met were white, middle-class or above, and college educated. Many had Bachelor's degrees, and quite a few had post-graduate degrees. There were roughly equal numbers of men and women, and a sizable minority of gay men and lesbians. Some middle-aged people were very active, but the most active people were generally split into younger (20-35) and older (60+) crowds. As discussed in

Chapter Five, members were split between “newcomers” who had little to no activist history and “veterans” who had extensive histories of activism. Most lived in modest homes and worked middle-class jobs, including several elementary school teachers, real estate agents, and freelance business consultants. The majority identified as Democrats for voting purposes, but considered themselves progressives first and foremost. More than any other feature, members shared outrage at the Bush administration’s foreign and domestic policies, most notably the invasion of Iraq. Other sociological studies involving MoveOn members have shown similar trends in the age, racial composition, gender ratio, and political identification of members (Heaney and Rojas 2007; Rohlinger and Brown 2009).

To supplement my ethnographic observations, I sampled 1,400 names from a list of 11,335 people who had contributed \$200 to \$5,000 to MoveOn during the 2007-2008 election cycle (Center for Responsive Politics 2009). This list was biased toward wealthier MoveOn members, but because MoveOn did not have official demographic data on members, it was the closest I could come to a membership list. The list included each contributor’s name, city of residence, occupation, and contribution amount. At least one contributor lived in every state except the Dakotas, but they were concentrated in California, New York, Massachusetts, Washington, and Texas. This top five reflected a general trend of more contributors coming from states Obama carried in 2008 with the exception of Texas, which most likely made the list simply by virtue of being the second most populous state in the country (United States Census Bureau 2009). Retirees, business people (self-employed and executives), educators (professors, teachers, and students), artists (including writers), and health and human service providers (physicians, psychologists, and nurses) dominated the list. This data generally reflected my ethnographic observations, although as would be expected, it underrepresented younger and less wealthy

members.

To crosscheck my ethnographic observations and qualitative data analysis, I examined two additional studies. A study of Howard Dean's presidential campaign showed that Dean activists were whiter, wealthier, and more highly educated than *both* the general public and members of the Democratic Party. They identified as progressives more than Democrats, and were motivated by the Iraq war, universal health care, environmental protection, and other issues that reflected MoveOn's agenda (MoveOn.org 2009a; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2005). Likewise, a poll of over 10,000 readers and contributors to the Daily Kos showed that they were more likely than the general U.S. population to be male, wealthy, white, and middle-aged (median age of 45-49 years) (DrSteveB 2008). Overall, these studies reaffirmed by other findings, and showed that MoveOn's membership reflected demographic trends within the progressive movement.

MoveOn members may be best described as "Political Influentials" (Graf and Darr 2004). Like MoveOn members, Political Influentials tend to be wealthy, highly educated, disproportionately white, and liberal (Darr and Graf 2007). They are well-informed and well-connected citizens who are able to shape others' perspectives on political issues (Graf and Darr 2004; Keller and Berry 2003). A subset of Political Influentials, called "online political citizens," rely primarily upon the internet to inform themselves about political issues, and attempt to persuade others through discussion boards and blogs. Online political citizens comprise only seven percent of the U.S. population, but exert disproportionate influence over online political opinion formation (Graf and Darr 2004).

In summary, MoveOn members were a well-informed and motivated group of Political Influentials who saw MoveOn as a way to channel their frustration with the Bush administration

into action. Although in some ways they represented a cross-section of the American population, in aggregate MoveOn members were wealthier, whiter, and more highly educated than the average American. In contrast to the image propagated by conservative commentators, MoveOn members were not extremists. In fact, they sought to improve the lives of Americans by working *within* the existing system. MoveOn was simply one avenue through which these informed and active citizens tried to effect change. They used the tools made available by MoveOn to connect with like-minded people and lobby the federal government. These people were not a threat to the conservative movement because of an extremist ideology. Rather, they constituted a threat because they were hubs of political influence both online and offline, and were embedded in networks of relatively powerful Americans.

TYOLOGY OF PARTICIPATION

Technically, anyone who ever wound up on MoveOn's e-mail list, whether by volition or accident, was considered a member. This meant that the "member" label itself did little to describe participants' levels of action. To clarify, I present a typology of participation. Individual members often shifted between these levels or operated simultaneously in multiple categories, but the typology is nonetheless useful for describing the range of experiences that were available to MoveOn members.

At the lowest level of activity were *e-mail recipients*, people who were on the e-mail list but did not participate in online or offline activism. For these people, MoveOn may have functioned more like a news source than a portal for activism. I was unable to interview any members at this level because I could not contact them at events, and none responded to interview solicitations I repeatedly posted online and around my university campus. Ironically, these people simultaneously made up the majority of MoveOn's reported five million members,

and were probably the least likely to identify as members.

One step above recipients were *online activists*, people whose primary or exclusive methods of participation were petitions, donations, and other forms of online activity. Online activists varied greatly in their levels of response to MoveOn's action requests: some signed nearly every e-petition or frequently sent money, while others were more selective. I interviewed fourteen online activists, and discovered that they did not participate in offline events for one of two reasons: 1) they had family or work obligations that prevented them from attending public events; or 2) they were anxious about publicly associating themselves with MoveOn. The latter was especially true for people who lived in areas where progressive political views were unpopular.

Local activists were members who participated in offline events but did not take on leadership roles. Some attended one or two events, while others became "regulars" in the local MoveOn scene and were entrusted with minor tasks, like handing out candles at vigils. I participated at this level for roughly two years while doing my research. During that time, I met hundreds of other local activists, and interviewed twelve of them. I found that some people participated as local activists for years, but this level of activity was more often transitory. Several people who engaged in one or two offline actions did not enjoy the experience or realized they did not have the time to commit to the effort, and thus became online activists. Other local activists who were enthusiastic and reliable were recruited to leadership positions and became local organizers.

Local organizers often got their start when a council coordinator asked them to host an event. If they organized a successful event, they were asked to join their local council's leadership team. In this role, they worked with a small group of other local organizers (usually

between two and five others) who made decisions about where to hold events, who would host these events, and other decisions regarding the delegation of organizing tasks. I worked as a local organizer for approximately one year. This role gave me insight into how MoveOn coordinated offline events, and helped me arrange interviews with six local organizers.

The highest volunteer position open to MoveOn members was the *regional coordinator* role. Regional coordinators were usually recruited from the ranks of local organizers by MoveOn's paid field organizers, although local organizers could recommend local activists for the position. As described in the overview of MoveOn's council system, regional coordinators built new councils, and helped existing councils organize events and recruit new members. I served as a regional coordinator from April to December of 2008. From this vantage point, I got an inside look at MoveOn's national field operation, and made contact with thirty-five regional coordinators, eighteen of whom I interviewed.

Above the regional coordinators were members of MoveOn's paid staff. *Field organizers* trained regional coordinators and provided them with a bigger picture perspective on how their individual organizing efforts related to MoveOn's overall strategic vision. They reported to the *national leadership team*, a small staff of men and women who were mostly in their twenties and thirties. This team planned MoveOn's overall strategy, decided which tactics to use for each issue campaign, and wrote the e-mails sent out to MoveOn's five million members. Most had worked for other political organizations before MoveOn, and several started up new activist organizations after leaving MoveOn. Through my work as a regional coordinator, I made contact with twelve field organizers and six members of MoveOn's national leadership team. I was able to interview four field organizers and three current or former staff members.

CONCLUSION

MoveOn must be understood as only one participant in a continuing struggle between progressive and conservative forces in the United States. It emerged at a time when the internet was just beginning to become the ubiquitous communication tool it is today, and its founders had the knowledge and opportunity to pioneer new ways to use this tool to mobilize citizens for political activism. While remaining rooted in the pragmatic and progressive vision of its predecessors, MoveOn continued to develop innovative ways to get people involved in the democratic process. Its service orientation to members and opt-in model of activism allowed members to choose their level of participation and remain connected to the organization even when they were not participating at all. In the next chapter, I outline my methods of data collection and analysis, and then dedicate Chapters Four through Eight to descriptions of the interpretive processes occurring both within and outside of MoveOn.

CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter, I discuss why I used an ethnographic approach to study MoveOn. In addition, I explain how I entered the setting, negotiated my roles within the organization, and eventually disengaged from it. Along with recounting my experiences and a participant observer, I describe how I collected data through other ethnographic approaches and how I analyzed this data. At the end of the chapter, I address some difficulties I experienced while researching MoveOn.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PROCESS

The essential premise of ethnography is that the best way to understand a social group is to become part of it, participating, observing, and asking questions along the way. As Blumer (1969) and others (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Johnson 1975; Prus 1991) noted, an ethnographic approach allows the researcher access to the symbolic meaning making processes by which participants in a setting understand themselves and their environment. The goal of this method is to achieve “analytical realism” (Altheide and Johnson 1994), an account of the setting and its participants that approximates as closely as possible the “reality” of the setting as it is constructed by those who participate within it. To accomplish this level of realism, ethnographers strive for what Geertz (1983) called “thick description,” a deep and detailed record of their interactions, emotions, and observations while in the setting. Successful ethnographers achieve an “empathic understanding” (Johnson 1975) of what it is like to be a normal member of the group they are studying. This understanding is achieved by immersing yourself into the setting completely, sharing a sore back or a broken heart with people who once you may have thought of as “participants” but now you know as friends and colleagues. This

deep understanding increases the validity and credibility of researchers' claims because it assures that their conclusions are grounded in the lived reality of the group, not abstract notions of what *might* be happening therein (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Hammersley 2002).

My research interests in MoveOn were best addressed by achieving an “intimate familiarity” (Blumer 1969) with the organization and its members through participation in online and offline activism. After volunteering for “Leave No Voter Behind,” MoveOn’s get-out-the-vote effort for John Kerry in 2004, I was intrigued by the way the organization seamlessly intertwined traditional grassroots activism with innovative online voter outreach tools. In this program, volunteers could print out lists of targeted voters in their neighborhoods, spend the day talking face-to-face with these neighbors, and return home to upload the results of these conversations to a centralized database. I was intrigued by this marriage of tradition and technology, and wondered if it was effective in getting more people involved in political action and, ultimately, in influencing elections.

GETTING IN

By the time I entered graduate school in the fall of 2003, the attacks of 9/11 and subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq had politicized American culture and polarized public opinion (Dodson 2010; Layman et al. 2006). I wanted to be involved in the emerging anti-war movement, but realized that completion of my doctoral degree needed to be my priority. To accommodate both desires, I decided to choose a dissertation topic that allowed me to participate in activism while conducting research. During this period—I do not recall exactly when (a common experience among MoveOn members, as I discovered)—I signed up to receive MoveOn’s e-mail messages, which at the time were focused almost exclusively on the Iraq war and the upcoming presidential election. I remained simply an e-mail recipient and occasional

online activist until August 2004, when a local MoveOn organizer called me out of the blue and asked if I would be interested in getting involved in “Leave No Voter Behind.” I gladly accepted this opportunity to help John Kerry defeat George W. Bush, but did not think about MoveOn as a research topic at the time.

I became a “precinct leader” for MoveOn, which meant (at least in theory) I was in charge of organizing other MoveOn members in my neighborhood to go door-to-door and encourage people to vote for John Kerry. In reality, I had moved into the neighborhood just one month earlier and knew no one, so I took it upon myself to canvass the neighborhood alone. For months, I walked around and knocked on strangers’ doors or called people when it was too dark or cold to be canvassing. On Election Day 2004, I worked all day in frigid weather to make sure that all of the people I had contacted through calls and canvassing actually voted. Somewhere in the midst of my election work, I began wondering why people like myself were dedicating long hours to an organization that existed almost exclusively in the cloudy realm of cyberspace. Why was I so diligently canvassing and reporting my results to this faceless entity, MoveOn? Why were so many other people sending twenty, fifty, even hundreds of dollars to a group whose leaders they had never even seen, let alone met? What drove this commitment to MoveOn? I decided to try to find out.

Nominal entry into MoveOn was actually quite simple. Technically, I became a “member” as soon as I signed up to receive MoveOn’s e-mails. This membership did not grant me access to anything except MoveOn’s e-mail messages that, while interesting in their own right, did not constitute an ethnographic setting. Unlike many online groups studied in virtual ethnographies, MoveOn did not have an online social space, such as a discussion board or interactive online “world,” in which members could participate and communicate (Carter 2005; Garcia et al. 2009;

Hampton and Wellman 1999; Hine 2000, 2005; Hughey 2008; Ruhleder 2000). In order to begin participant observation, I had to become involved on the local level. My participation in “Leave No Voter Behind” should have given me an avenue to become integrated into MoveOn’s local “scene,” but it did not for two reasons. As I already mentioned, my lack of integration into my neighborhood meant that I did all of my canvassing alone and therefore did not form relationships with other local MoveOn members. Secondly, MoveOn’s intense local presence vanished after the election because it was dedicated solely to electing Kerry for president. MoveOn released the few organizers I had met during get-out-the-vote training. I tried to contact them, but their MoveOn e-mail addresses were no longer functional. I knew there had to be hundreds, if not thousands, of MoveOn members in the city, but I was at a loss as to how to contact them.

Finally, in March 2005 MoveOn invited members to attend house parties where they would meet to discuss the creation of “Operation Democracy,” a permanent campaign to push forward progressive issues and candidates. I jumped at the opportunity to meet a group of local MoveOn members, and attended a house party in my neighborhood. About twenty-five people crammed into the living room of a modest middle-class house, drinking wine from plastic cups and snacking on cheese and crackers. For about two hours we chatted, traded stories of post-election depression, and brainstormed ways that MoveOn could advance a progressive agenda during Bush’s second term. During a brainstorming session, I met a man who was recruiting MoveOn members for a locally-based version of MoveOn he had started with other members he met while working on the 2004 election. He invited me to a meeting of the organizing committee for this group, where I met two people who later became key informants. I attended several more meetings of this small group as well as other public events MoveOn organized in the spring of

2005.

After a few months of attending these events, I learned that they were being organized by a local MoveOn council, which included many of the most active MoveOn members in the area. I knew that I needed to integrate myself into this group in order to more fully understand how MoveOn worked, so I did what I could to ingratiate myself to council members. As Lofland et al. (2006) suggested, I began by taking on small responsibilities, like calling people to recruit them for events, bringing candles or signs to events, and helping event organizers carry tables and other materials to and from their cars. This helped me present myself as an honest, helpful member, and allowed me to initiate informal conversations that built rapport with local council leaders (Shaffir 1991).

Over the course of my four years of participant observation, my participation slowly increased from occasionally signing e-petitions to eventually being among the most active and highly responsible volunteers in the organization. From the time I signed up for MoveOn's e-mail until August 2004, I experienced what it felt like to be just another person on the e-mail list (indeed, as this was prior to my research, I *was* just another member). With my participation during the 2004 election season, I began my journey into MoveOn's offline activism. From 2005 through the first part of 2008, I was a core member of my local MoveOn council. In this role, I helped plan public events, such as anti-war vigils, sidewalk protests, and visits to congressional offices. I spoke at some events, made recruitment calls, brought supplies (candles, signs), and contacted the local media to get the word out about our events. During this period I also participated in MoveOn's "Call for Change" campaign, in which members got together at houses or temporary phone banking offices to call into competitive congressional districts around the country and urge people to vote for the Democrats in the 2006 mid-term elections.

Then, in April of 2008, a local MoveOn field organizer asked me if I would like to be a regional coordinator. This was still a volunteer position, but it involved much more responsibility than my council work, and provided opportunities to meet members of MoveOn's paid staff. As a regional coordinator, I coordinated with MoveOn's paid organizers to implement MoveOn's goals and plans at the local level in the state in which I lived at the time. In practice, this meant twice-weekly conference calls with my field organizer and other regional coordinators, hours of calls trying to recruit people to host or attend events, and more calls to encourage active MoveOn members to form coordinating councils in places where none currently existed. I held this position until the end of November 2008, when I stepped down to focus on writing my dissertation. My participation has now come full circle, as I am once again an ordinary e-mail recipient.

FINDING MY RESEARCH ROLE

Although my roles as a member of MoveOn shifted repeatedly over my four years of participation, my research role remained fairly consistent. From the beginning, I was open about my research interests with the local MoveOn members I met. In fact, I found that emphasizing my student status actually helped me build rapport with other members, unlike Shaffir (1991) and Thorne (1979) who discovered that their academic affiliations made members of their settings suspicious of their motives. In my case, introducing myself as a graduate student had several benefits. First, it allowed me to segue into a mention of my research on MoveOn, thus ensuring that I remained overt about my researcher status. Secondly, it helped other members relate to me, because most had completed at least four years of college, and quite a few had post-graduate degrees. This made my research interest relatable to them, and made them generally more willing to participate in interviews. Lastly, by emphasizing my student status I positioned

myself as someone who desired to “learn the ropes” (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991) of grassroots activism. More experienced activists gladly took me under their wings and taught me how to obtain permits for our protests, how to contact local media, and other tricks of the trade.

In general, I took a “shallow cover” (Fine 1980) position in my research, meaning I announced my research intent whenever possible but did not disclose specifics about my research questions. To a great degree, this lack of specificity was due as much to the emergent nature of research interests in an ethnographic study as to my desire to keep my research goals secret. Later, after I had developed clearer research questions, I tended to speak about them only in broad terms when asked what I was researching. For example, rather than telling interview participants that I was hoping to compare their perceptions of MoveOn’s organizational identity with those presented in the news, I simply explained that I was seeing what members thought about the way MoveOn was portrayed in the news. These more general explanations of my research interests were practical, in that members did not speak “sociologese” and therefore would likely be confused by a detailed explanation, but they were also designed to prevent members from altering what they said or did out of concern that I was watching them.

Early on, I took an “active-member-researcher” role (Adler and Adler 1987) in MoveOn. I participated in all of the activities that ordinary members did, but I maintained an analytical skepticism regarding the effectiveness of the organization’s efforts. Although I shared the progressive worldview espoused by MoveOn, I was not convinced that e-petitions and candlelight vigils would have any influence at all upon the actions of the Bush administration or even public opinion. However, as my level of activity and responsibility increased over the years, I shifted closer to the “complete-member-researcher” (Adler and Adler 1987) end of the spectrum. Though I always maintained an awareness that I was ultimately participating in

MoveOn as a researcher, I internalized the role obligations of my position as a regional coordinator. In Snow, Benford, and Anderson's (1986) terms, I became an "ardent activist," enjoying the rights of access inherent to my membership role while experiencing the burden of its responsibility and consequent joy or guilt depending on the outcomes of my actions as a regional coordinator (see also Gans 1982; Thorne 1979).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Along with participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews and collected many documents produced by or pertaining to MoveOn in an attempt to "triangulate" (Denzin 1989) my data. After briefly addressing each data source, I discuss the analytical approaches I used to turn the mountain of empirical data into conceptually useful material.

Participant Observation

My decision to engage in participant observation of MoveOn was somewhat "opportunistic" (Reimer 1977) in nature, in that I was already participating in the group and received requests for action of one sort or another simply by virtue of being on the e-mail list. These requests split my participation into online and offline components, which often overlapped in practice. MoveOn was a "multimodal social world" (Garcia et al. 2009) where the nature of participation and communication blurred the boundary between "virtual" and "real" worlds. Online participation consisted mostly of what I call *distributed collective action*, individualized participation in actions that are aggregated with the actions of others to form a cohesive collective effort, despite the fact that participants' actions are separated by time and space. Examples of distributed collective action include signing e-petitions, providing financial support for MoveOn's efforts, and even making calls to congressional offices as the result of an e-mail request. MoveOn also used its e-mail list to coordinate many offline events, like candlelight

vigils, congressional office visits, and house parties. These events, which are examples of *collocated collective action*, facilitated face-to-face communication and development of localized social networks among members.

As described in the previous section, I participated in and helped organize many offline MoveOn events during my four years of participant observation. This participation was critical for my research, not only for what I learned about MoveOn directly as a result of my involvement but also for the contacts I made with local members who I later interviewed. Furthermore, my active participation in my local MoveOn council led to contacts with organizers who recommended me for the regional coordinator position, and granted me credibility as a committed MoveOn member. This legitimating function of participation came in handy when I approached staff members about doing interviews for my research. One staffer, in fact, told me that he did not ordinarily grant interviews with people researching MoveOn because he received so many requests, but he had made an exception in my case because I had done so much for MoveOn over the years.

I generally did not take notes while participating in MoveOn events, especially when I was responsible for running the events. At some events, such as council meetings or trainings, it was perfectly appropriate (and, indeed, expected) to take notes. At others, particularly the candlelight vigils memorializing the dead soldiers and citizens in Iraq and Afghanistan, I felt it would be disrespectful to take notes. In such cases, I waited until I returned to my car or home to jot down notes or record my thoughts on a digital recorder. These “jottings” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) were the seeds from which my field notes sprouted. I usually typed up full field notes within a day or two of the events in order to retain as much detail as possible. At first my field notes were a rambling mess of detailed descriptions, thoughts, and reminders to look up

academic writings on topics that I thought might become important for my research. Over time, as I began to focus on what Blumer (1969) called “sensitizing concepts” that emerged from my notes and interviews, my field notes became more structured and I began “memoing” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) about patterns I was beginning to see in the data (see also Jorgensen 1989; Lofland and Lofland 1984).

Ironically, although I found MoveOn’s offline actions to be a much richer source of data, the vast majority of members never participate in any of the organization’s offline events. According to accounts from multiple MoveOn staffers, roughly eighty to ninety percent of members participate exclusively online. Because such participation makes up the bulk of members’ action, it was important for me to engage in online activism in addition to my offline participation. I had signed e-petitions even before I began researching MoveOn, but beginning in 2005 I ramped up my online activism. Over the course of my research, I signed dozens of e-petitions, called my congressional representatives, sent letters to my local newspaper on several occasions, and donated what little I could on my graduate student budget. This participation, in conjunction with my offline work, gave me a good sense of the many avenues by which members could get involved in MoveOn depending on their inclinations and opportunities. In my four years of participant observation, I experienced all levels and types of activity available in MoveOn, and achieved the “intimate familiarity” (Blumer 1969) necessary for successful ethnographic research.

Interviews

In total, I conducted eighty-one interviews (including five e-mailed questionnaires) with people at various levels of activity in MoveOn and outside of the organization. Most of these interviews were semi-structured, meaning I had an interview guide on hand to maintain a basic

trajectory in the interview, but also allowed participants to wander down unforeseen avenues of thought (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Kvale 1996). I approached the interviews as “guided conversations” (Rubin and Rubin 1995) in which I maintained an informal tone while keeping track of the conversation and redirecting it if necessary. Later, after I had clarified my research questions, I opted for a more structured approach that stuck more solidly to the interview guide, although I still left some room for exploration. As Weiss (1994) recommended, I transcribed the first dozen interviews in order to catch rookie interviewing mistakes like talking over responses, missing opportunities for follow-up questions, or simply talking too much. This process also helped me refine my interview guide by omitting redundant questions and adding questions that arose from participants’ comments (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lofland et al. 2006). The data gathered through these interviews provided a deeper understanding of MoveOn than I would have achieved through participant observation and document analysis alone (Warren 2002).

I conducted fifty-three interviews with members of MoveOn; twenty-seven of these were face-to-face, twenty-five were conducted over the phone, and one participant preferred to submit answers through e-mail. These interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours, and averaged thirty-three single-spaced pages when transcribed. Due to privacy concerns, MoveOn would not release members’ contact information to me, so my access was initially limited to members I met through participant observation and “snowball sampling” (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981) from these initial contacts. This sampling technique, however, overrepresented active MoveOn members (the ten to twenty percent that attended at least one event). In an attempt to sample a wider variety of MoveOn members, both in terms of participation level and geographic location, I began soliciting interviews via the internet. I posted interview requests on the political bulletin boards of Craig’s List in fifty-five cities during the summer and fall of 2007, and

conducted thirteen interviews with members contacted this way. I also joined MoveOn's Facebook and MySpace groups in hopes of contacting younger members and online activists. These efforts proved futile because, as I found when several people responded to me, many members of the groups on these social networking sites knew little about the organization, and had casually joined on a friend's recommendation. In addition, when several people asked me not to "spam" them with my requests, I realized that I had inadvertently committed a social networking faux pas by cold contacting people through MySpace and Facebook without being their "friends." In short, aside from the interviews I completed with Craig's List respondents, my internet solicitation strategy was a complete bust.

I did, however, manage to interview four field organizers hired by MoveOn through Grassroots Campaigns, Incorporated, as well as three members of MoveOn's paid staff. My role as a regional coordinator allowed me to meet at least a dozen paid organizers and a handful of staff members. The role also legitimated me as a bona fide MoveOn activist, not merely a nosy researcher, and enabled me to request interviews face-to-face instead of anonymously via e-mail, thus increasing my chances of receiving an affirmative (or, indeed, any) response. These interviews helped me understand MoveOn's organizational structure, decision-making processes, and overall strategy.

My last two sets of interviews were guided by research questions about MoveOn's effectiveness in influencing national politics and establishing a model of online activism. First, I chose "theoretical samples" (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of Democratic and Republican congressional representatives in order to ask their staffs how they actually handled the e-petitions and phone calls received from MoveOn members. About one year after the 2008 election, I contacted ninety-two congressional offices in Washington, D.C., and completed twelve informal

telephone interviews with staff members working for both Republicans and Democrats. I also constructed a three-page questionnaire that was based on my interview guide, and received four completed questionnaires from congressional aides who were unable to do telephone interviews. To assess MoveOn's influence as a model for online activism, I contacted thirteen progressive and seven conservative online activist organizations. None of the conservative groups responded, but I conducted five telephone interviews with representatives from progressive organizations. These conversations shed light on the importance of MoveOn's model of online activism.

Documents

I collected two types of documents related to MoveOn. *Primary documents* were created by MoveOn, and included e-mails, websites, flyers, scripts, reports, press releases, and other such documents. I collected all of the e-mail messages I received through MoveOn's e-mail system between January 2005 and December 2009, totaling nearly 1,000 e-mails. I also accumulated a wide assortment of flyers, scripts, and other documents during my participant observation in multiple roles within MoveOn. These documents showed how MoveOn used rhetoric to shape its public image, frame its issues, and influence views of the organization.

Secondary documents, on the other hand, were created by people or organizations other than MoveOn, but nonetheless pertained directly to MoveOn. These documents included newspaper and magazine articles, television news transcripts, blog entries, and other such items. Through Lexis Nexis and other web searches, I gathered 522 MoveOn-related articles, transcripts, and blog posts published in 2007 by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Post*, *The Washington Times*, Fox News Channel's *The O'Reilly Factor*, and progressive blogs *Daily Kos* and *Huffington Post*. I selected these sources to cover a broad range of opinions about MoveOn, from conservatively slanted criticisms to progressively slanted

accolades and more mainstream, ostensibly objective news reports. Analysis of these documents forms the basis of Chapter Six. Along with examining how MoveOn's organizational identity was framed, I wanted to assess whether it was influencing coverage of its issues. To this end, I analyzed 725 news articles printed between 2006 and 2009 in newspapers representing fifteen media markets. Utilizing three internet search engines (Yahoo!, Bing, and Google) and Lexis Nexis, I also tracked down 421 letters to the editor that had been printed as a result of MoveOn's request that members send letters containing specific issues frames to their local newspapers.

Data Analysis

Although the processes of data analysis differed slightly for each type of data, the basic procedure was the same for field notes, interviews, and other documents. In keeping with the constant comparative method (Glaser 1965; Glaser and Strauss 1967), I read and re-read each piece of data, noting what I thought were important passages and emerging patterns. This led to my initial codes, which I revised, combined, and/or discarded, as I began to focus on a few "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer 1969; Jorgenson 1989; Lofland and Lofland 1984). Particularly when analyzing primary and secondary documents, I used Altheide's (1987, 1996) method of qualitative content analysis to guide my development of codes. This method requires that an initial coding protocol is developed on the basis of patterns in the data, and is left open to revision as coding categories are expanded or consolidated. Through this analysis, I developed a theoretical understanding of how MoveOn worked, how members experienced the organization, and whether it was ultimately successful in its attempts to shape policy, elections, and public opinion.

GETTING OUT

Because I wanted to observe MoveOn through two presidential cycles, I decided to

maintain my participant observation through November of 2008. When I agreed to be a regional coordinator in April 2008, I informed my field organizer that I would be pulling out of the position after the election to transition into full-time dissertation writing. As a regional coordinator, the final months leading up to the election were an intense period of organizing, recruiting, canvassing, and doing anything possible to get Obama elected. For the last month of the campaign, I volunteered roughly twenty hours per week on top of teaching, revising papers for journal submissions, and trying to keep my romantic relationship from becoming strained by my lack of availability. The intensity of demands placed upon me took a mental toll, and I considered quitting my election work several times prior to the election. Because of my commitment to my field organizer and my research, I maintained my role as regional coordinator until the end of November 2008.

My transition out of MoveOn was actually quite smooth. Because my field organizer and I had agreed that I would leave after the election, she had already lined up several potential replacements for me by the beginning of November. In addition, many progressives were energized by Obama's victory and, in the midst of this euphoria, wanted to get more involved in political organizing work. This resulted in a flood of MoveOn members that showed interest in becoming regional coordinators and council coordinators, thus reducing both the need for me to remain the guilt felt for leaving. My transition out of the setting was also less noticeable because several other regional coordinators decided to leave their positions after the election, for a variety of reasons. Thus, because of the fluctuating nature of participation in political activism, I was able to disengage from MoveOn without my departure being too conspicuous (Kaplan 1991).

After leaving my active role in MoveOn, I maintained contact with my field organizer and several other organizers in the region because we had become friends. However, once I was no

longer obligated to participate in the weekly conference calls that structured my contacts with other regional coordinators, I quickly lost touch with these people. I moved out of state in early 2009 to focus solely on writing my dissertation, so the face-to-face relationships I developed with local MoveOn activists also dried up. Although I still have some passive contact with a few of these people through sites like Facebook and MySpace, for the most part my relationships with MoveOn members and organizers did not last much beyond the weeks immediately following the presidential election. Most of these relationships were based on mutual activism and shared experiences with the requirements of our roles in MoveOn's election work, so once the election was over and I left my role there was little upon which to build lasting relationships. In addition, these relationships relied upon constant communication through e-mail lists and conference calls, both of which I no longer could access once I stepped out of the regional coordinator role. This, combined with the fact that regional coordinators were, by definition, spread throughout the United States, meant that I had no "structured contact" with other MoveOn organizers (Stebbins 1991).

Reflecting on my experiences in MoveOn over the four years I was involved, I have mixed feelings about the organization and how I was affected by it. Going into this research, I was intrigued and impressed by MoveOn's combination of online and offline activism. As I progressed from a casual participant to an organizer, the mystery of how MoveOn pulled off their offline actions slowly gave way to a sense of monotony that emerged from the predictable and somewhat scattershot ways that I discovered these events were actually organized. What from the outside seemed like a flawless system for organizing local events on a national scale could sometimes feel to an organizer like a mad scramble to hurriedly throw together events that you hoped people would attend. I felt like a fraud when I was required to essentially sell the idea

of *another* vigil, protest, or meeting to the council members in my region, especially when I did not see the value of these actions. This feeling of inauthenticity certainly contributed to my occasional desire to simply quit being active in MoveOn. On the other hand, my experiences as a volunteer organizer for MoveOn allowed me to grow from an observer of political events to a trained (if not always perfect) political organizer. The training I received and the skills I acquired during my tenures as a core council member and regional coordinator were tremendously important for building my confidence and for helping me envision myself as an activist (as I discuss in Chapter Five).

Through all of these ups and downs, I got a good sense of what it was like to be an active member of MoveOn, not just a researcher pretending to be an active member. Over my four years of participation, I experienced the same emotional highs and lows felt by other members, and toiled in the trenches alongside other regional coordinators and paid organizers. Although I recognize that my experience was fundamentally shaped by my role as a researcher, I believe that I achieved an “empathic understanding” (Johnson 1975) of what it was like to be a MoveOn member.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES

One of the biggest methodological difficulties I faced was that, as an online organization, MoveOn did not have a national headquarters or a stable physical setting. When I began my research, I assumed that I would be able to visit MoveOn’s office to get an inside perspective on how the organization ran and to make contacts with staff members, like Kunda (1992) did in his ethnography of a high-tech corporation. However, as I quickly learned, MoveOn is a “virtual” organization in which staff members work from their homes all across the country. Although this was theoretically interesting, it was a practical disadvantage in terms of being able to integrate

myself into the real-world social scene that made up the setting. Moreover, MoveOn had no public listing of its current staff or a contact list including staff e-mail addresses. This was a practical necessity to prevent its small staff from being overwhelmed with e-mails, but it meant that I had no direct line to staff to request interviews. MoveOn did have a general “Contact Us” link on its website, but despite trying several times to make inquiries through this avenue, I never received any response except for an automatic message that read, “Thanks for contacting MoveOn. We welcome your comments and suggestions. We get a lot of feedback, so please don’t expect a personal reply. But all mail is read” (3/4/05 e-mail). A similar message appeared if you tried to directly reply to MoveOn’s e-mail messages. This insularity made it very difficult for me to contact congressional leaders.

To overcome these difficulties, I slowly worked my way up the chain of responsibility in MoveOn until I was at a position (regional coordinator) that was the highest position I could attain as a volunteer. This position gave me the opportunity to finally contact and interview some of MoveOn’s paid staff. One major break came in September 2008 when I was invited, along with all regional coordinators, to a three-day intensive training in Chicago, Illinois, to prepare for the upcoming election work. There I was able to network with thirty-five other regional coordinators and four MoveOn paid staffers, plus about a dozen field organizers from Grassroots Campaigns, Incorporated. Only after meeting these people face-to-face and participating in shared real-world experiences was I able to gain access to the leaders of this ostensibly non-hierarchical virtual organization.

The other major difficulty I faced was the “role conflict” (Snow 1980; Stryker 1980) I experienced as an activist-researcher. In the early stages of my research when my levels of participation and responsibility in MoveOn were relatively low, I clearly viewed myself as a

researcher first and a MoveOn member second. This distinction became more difficult as I transitioned into ever-higher levels of activism, culminating in the regional coordinator position in 2008. Because of the intensity of commitment required by this role, my MoveOn member identity became more salient (Stryker 1980), to the point where this identity competed for primacy with my researcher identity. This conflict was further compounded by the fact that other MoveOn members and organizers were sometimes unsure of my motives for participation. In one telling instance, I was making phone calls for MoveOn's 2006 "Call for Change" get-out-the-vote effort at a temporary phonebanking office when one volunteer who I had told about my research interest asked me with suspicion in her voice, "So are you here as a researcher or as a member?" Her question surprised me and forced me to reflect upon my motives for participating. In the end, I said, "Both." However, for weeks afterward her question resonated in my mind, and made me realize that some MoveOn members wondered if I was a "true" activist or just an opportunistic researcher.

This inner conflict between my member and researcher role caused a mixture of emotions. When things went well, I shared in the joy and sense of accomplishment felt by the members with whom I had worked. At other times, I felt frustrated by the high levels of time and energy demanded by my council and regional coordinator roles. Like Thorne (1979) in her research on the Vietnam draft resistance movement, I felt competing pressures to allocate time to my research duties and to my membership role requirements. I tried to reduce this sense of conflict by reminding myself that participation *was* a research task, and more active engagement in the setting would ultimately yield rich data and interview contacts.

Perhaps the best indicator of my emotional investment in MoveOn was the guilt I felt when I did things that felt inauthentic or manipulative. I experienced pangs of guilt when I

participated in actions as a researcher while other members believed I was there because of my commitment to the movement. On several occasions, I really did not want to participate in or help organize an event, but I knew that it was important for my research to witness the planning and implementation of the action. Much like Thorne (1979), I often felt like a phony as I tried to maintain a façade of enthusiasm to mask my lack of personal conviction. These guilty feelings also arose when I consciously decided to volunteer for tasks in order to build rapport with members or staffers, thereby creating feelings of reciprocity that I later drew upon when soliciting interviews (Adler and Adler 1991; Wax 1952).

Finally, I felt guilty upon my departure from MoveOn. On the one hand, my guilt resulted from feeling that I had abandoned my post and left my field organizer, with whom I had developed a close relationship, to scramble to fill my position. Even though this feeling was moderated somewhat by the fact that other regional coordinators also quit after the 2008 election, my personal commitment to my field organizer and regional coordinator team made my departure painful. On the other hand, I felt guilty for being *happy* to slip out of my regional coordinator role. By the end of the 2008 election season, I was utterly burned out by the constant demands to build MoveOn councils, organize local actions, and recruit new volunteers for councils. Like Stebbins (1991) reported in his account of leaving the field, the enthusiasm with which I started my research gave way to fatigue and a sense of monotony as my field experiences became repetitive and my data produced “diminishing returns” (Taylor 1991). After four years in the field, my energy was drained, my sense of excitement was gone, my file cabinets were overflowing with data, and I was ready to move on from MoveOn.

CHAPTER 4: THE CONSTRUCTION AND EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY IN MOVEON

This chapter examines MoveOn's attempts to construct a sense of community for members, and addresses the question of whether members actually experienced feelings of community. Online communities have become very popular among Americans (Horrigan and Rainie 2001), but questions remain about whether participants can develop bonds of trust and reciprocity that make online communities feel as "real" as traditional offline communities (Fernback 2007; Putnam 2000; Wellman et al. 2001). My analysis shows how MoveOn used rhetoric in its e-mails to create a sense of community, and reveals how these attempts related to members' actual sense of community.

COMMUNITY AS A RHETORICAL CONSTRUCT

Through interviews and participant observation, I discovered that only ten to twenty percent of MoveOn members ever participated in offline activism. Moreover, most of those who participated did not become integrated into MoveOn's local councils, where the strongest interpersonal connections were made. This lack of consistent involvement hampered community-building offline. At the same time, MoveOn's e-mail system was structured such that members could not directly communicate with one another, except in limited cases through a council's e-mail list. Although MoveOn's primary rationale for not allowing access to members' e-mail addresses was to prevent abuse of the system (e.g., spamming or personal attacks), the absence of person-to-person communication prevented members from developing relationships, either locally or nationally. To compensate for these factors, MoveOn attempted to create a sense of community through the rhetoric in its e-mails to members.

DEFINING COMMUNITY BOUNDARIES

Because most MoveOn members did not participate in offline activism, they were not exposed to the identity- and boundary-forming work that takes place between members during meetings, rallies, and other interpersonal situations (Barnes, Newman, and Sullivan 2006; Downton and Wehr 1998; Hunt and Benford 1994; Hunt et al. 1994). As a result, they relied upon MoveOn's leaders to define the boundaries of their activist community. Organizational leaders drew these boundaries rhetorically, creating an "us versus them" dynamic that created an image of a MoveOn community and facilitated subsequent mobilization.

Vilification of Opponents

One of the most common rhetorical strategies used in MoveOn's e-mails was portrayal of opponents as villains. Vilification is common among social movement organizations (Blain 1994; Burke 1967; Ellingson 1995; Gamson 1992; Hunt et al. 1994; Snow and Benford 1988; Vanderford 1989), and also frequently occurs during the construction of social problems (Best 1987; Cohen 1980; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). Vilification of the enemy, "unifies individuals in movements, provides a clear target for movement action, and allows activists to define themselves and their positions in opposition to those of their adversaries" (Vanderford 1989:166).

MoveOn relied upon two types of vilification rhetoric. In *personal vilification*, a specific individual was cast as evil or greedy. One example appeared in an e-mail message pertaining to the nomination of Alberto Gonzales for U.S. Attorney General. MoveOn alleged that, "Gonzales is the man who disgraced us with torture.... His unquestioning allegiance to George Bush runs deep enough to cloud his judgment in deadly ways" (1/6/05 e-mail). In another message, MoveOn accused Republican Senator George Allen of being racist after he referred to an Indian-American member of his opponent's campaign staff as "macaca," which translates as "monkey"

(Feldman 2006). MoveOn asserted, “Sen. Allen... has a long history of demeaning minorities,” and listed examples of Allen’s racial bigotry, such as displaying a noose in his office and opposing the creation of Martin Luther King Day (8/17/06 e-mail). By describing adversaries as threatening and immoral, MoveOn created an aura of danger in an attempt to increase members’ commitment and feelings of in-group solidarity (see Blain 1994). Thus, personal vilification ultimately helped MoveOn build a sense of community by rhetorically placing members in opposition to a cast of powerful and malevolent actors.

In *categorical vilification*, the target was an abstract social group that was “typified” (Berger and Luckmann 1967) as a single-minded bloc of villains. For example, when MoveOn asked members to oppose President Bush’s Social Security privatization plan, they targeted Republicans and investors, saying:

The Republicans are counting on scare tactics, half truths, and outright lies.... But behind all the deception, the reality is clear: the Republicans want to hand over our Social Security to their buddies on Wall Street (3/2/05 e-mail).

Similarly, in a message sent a few days before the 2006 mid-term elections, MoveOn painted a portrait of a nation divided between the haves and have-nots:

In the Republicans’ America, only a chosen few have a voice. They’re the Enrons and the Exxons, the Wall Street brokers and the K street lobbyists. For these lucky few, a friendly ear in Washington is just a fat check and a phone call away.

And then there’s the rest of America—the folks who get shut out. Hard-working Americans who can’t afford their own health insurance, who can’t feed their children and who are struggling to keep a roof over their heads—and basically anyone who dares to dissent against the Republican plan (11/4/06 e-mail).

When combined with personal vilification, categorical vilification allowed MoveOn to claim the moral high ground and helped members clarify their own ideological positions by giving them an enemy against which to react.

Delineation of In-Group Identity

Vilification of opponents was complemented by in-group identity formation. MoveOn constructed in-group identity through several rhetorical practices. First, it engaged in *ideological labeling*. This process involved frequent references to “progressive” political ideology without clear definition of the term’s meaning. This label was used to describe members, the organization, and its goals. Used this way, “progressive” served as a generic label that took the place of “liberal,” a term that was successfully reframed by conservatives as an indicator of weakness and elitism (Frank 2005; Lakoff 2004; Nunberg 2007). This is not to say that MoveOn did not have an underlying political philosophy, or to imply that members did not share any set of values. From my interviews with members and paid staff, it was clear that MoveOn’s politics were based on a general belief that the government should promote peace, equal rights, and equal opportunities for all. However, MoveOn never laid out a specific mission statement or set of values for its members, leaving “progressive” up for interpretation. In doing so, it allowed members to read their own set of beliefs into the label. Thus, the ambiguity of the “progressive” label helped create a perception of shared ideology and a sense of community by giving members an umbrella term under which to unite.

A second rhetorical strategy was the use of *member talk* in MoveOn’s e-mails. Nearly every e-mail opened with “Dear MoveOn member,” and messages were full of repeated references to “members.” I received one such message the weekend before “Super Tuesday” 2008, when twenty-four states held primaries and caucuses. The message began with the

standard “Dear MoveOn member” introduction, and then portrayed calling MoveOn members in states participating in Super Tuesday as an opportunity to connect with fellow “members”:

More than 1.7 million MoveOn members have the chance to vote Tuesday, and we need to do everything we can to make sure they turn out for Obama.... But many people lead busy lives and some MoveOn members will forget. A friendly reminder from another MoveOn member is the best way to change that.... If you’ve ever called MoveOn members on one of our previous campaigns, you know how much fun it can be. Your fellow MoveOn members are good folks, and many will appreciate your call (2/2/08 e-mail).

Messages that did not open with the standard “Dear MoveOn member” phrasing also appealed to the existence of a strong community of MoveOn “members” across the country. A message I received on October 15, 2006, began “Dear Marc,” and immediately launched into a paragraph laden with membership rhetoric:

Today, you will join thousands of other MoveOn members in homes and auditoriums across the country to call for change and watch the powerful new film *Iraq for Sale*. Yesterday, MoveOn members called an impressive 100,000 progressive voters from the Iraq the Vote parties!

Member talk was designed to elicit a sense of shared experience in light of the fact that most members never attended offline events, and therefore participated in isolation from one another. Most members participated together only in a metaphorical sense, and would have had difficulty envisioning themselves as part of a community without MoveOn’s rhetorical construction of this image of community.

ENCOURAGING A SENSE OF EFFICACY

MoveOn also needed to convince members that their efforts were worthwhile. This task was accomplished by assuring members that dramatic political change would result from their individual and collective actions. Through its messages, MoveOn suggested to its isolated members that they were, in fact, part of a powerful community of activists, and provided members with a “vocabulary of motives” for engaging in activism (Benford 1993; Mills 1940).

Individual Efficacy Appeals

Individual efficacy appeals were designed to increase members’ confidence in their personal ability to help MoveOn accomplish its goals. In the weeks leading up to the mid-term election in 2006, MoveOn wanted to motivate members to call progressive voters in competitive districts in order to get them to the polls. To convince members that their individual calls could change the election results, they asked Al Gore to make a personal appeal:

What you do this weekend could mean the difference between victory and defeat.... I know it’s easy to feel like your calls will be drops in a political ocean. I’m here to tell you that they’re not. I know a thing or two about close races where a few hundred “drops” make all the difference. And the margins in many of these races are even closer. You could personally turn out the voter who tips the balance (11/2/06 e-mail).

Most individual efficacy appeals did not come from authoritative sources like Al Gore, but used similar rhetoric to emphasize the importance of a single person’s contribution. Another appeal for calling, this time in an attempt to stop President Bush from sending more troops to Iraq, said, “we CAN win this vote—but it’s going to take lots of us working together and it could come down to a few key senators. Your calls could push the vote over the edge” (1/30/07 e-mail).

MoveOn also appealed to individuals’ senses of efficacy when trying to find event hosts or

raise money. In 2007, MoveOn sent me a request to host a vigil meant to pressure Congress to override Bush's veto of SCHIP, a children's health care law. After asking me to host the vigil, MoveOn emphasized my ability to singlehandedly make a difference, saying, "Lots of people from your neighborhood are ready to stand up for children's health care. We'll invite them. All they need is someone to help pull the vigil together" (10/12/07 e-mail). In another case, MoveOn tied individual efforts to those of other members by setting up a donation matching system. It cleverly appealed to members' individual efficacy by pointing out the consequences of inaction, before showing members how their efforts could be multiplied:

Imagine waking up one January morning and reading this headline: 'Obama's health care plan dies in Congress.' I don't want to feel like I could have done more. Do you?... If you donate today, another MoveOn member will match your donation.... Your donation of \$40 will become \$80. Double your impact by making a matched donation today (11/30/09 e-mail).

Such appeals combated the "free rider" problem commonly experienced by movements, wherein individuals choose not to participate because they do not recognize how their involvement will help the movement (Olson 1965). They also allowed members to feel a sense of personal efficacy in absence of the emotional connections and more tangible sense of collective action that typically characterize offline participation in social movements (Jasper 1997; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980). Because of the isolated nature of online activism, MoveOn needed to rhetorically create a sense that these isolated efforts were important to the overall success of the movement.

Collective Efficacy Appeals

Along with appealing to members' senses of individual efficacy, MoveOn also frequently

emphasized how members' efforts were linked together into a larger whole. For example, in September 2006, MoveOn asked people to host "Call for Change" parties, where members called Democratic voters in competitive congressional races. In one message, they claimed, "Control of the House is in reach, but making it happen is going to take a big push. Republicans have got millions of dollars in corporate money. What we have is people power. So it's going to take every last one of us—working together—to win" (9/7/06a e-mail). This claim was backed up by a comment from a member who hosted a calling party in the past:

The general atmosphere was incredible—very collegial!... The fact that so many people are motivated to come out to make these calls is incredible.... You can feel the momentum building, the tide is turning, and there is a sense that we CAN and WILL win this election in November!!!

Similarly, in a message sent one day after rallies were held in support of the SCHIP legislation, MoveOn reported, "last night, the streets came alive with chants, cheers, honks, and our urgent cry for health care.... With just a day's notice, 10,000 of us rallied at nearly 250 rapid response events nationwide!" (10/5/07 e-mail). To reinforce the sense that this effort was accomplished together, MoveOn included several reports from the rallies, including one where a member said, "It's wonderful to work with other MoveOn members and pass out leaflets.... It's democracy at work" (10/5/07 e-mail). It also included photographs from events around the country in order to cement the idea that each member was part of a larger collective effort.

MoveOn also contextualized action within the broader progressive movement, so members could visualize their actions as contributing not only to MoveOn's immediate goals but also to the advancement of progressive values. As it did when defining the boundaries of its identity, MoveOn portrayed certain legislative battles as a contest between the forces of good

(progressives) and evil (conservatives). For example, MoveOn sent the following message regarding the inclusion of a public health insurance option in the Senate health care bill:

Yesterday, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid announced that he's including a compromise version of the public option in the Senate's health care bill. This is a huge victory over conservatives who spent all summer trying to kill the public option.... Thanks to the tireless efforts of MoveOn members and the broader progressive movement, the public option now has a ton of momentum (10/27/09 e-mail).

By citing participation statistics, including comments or photos, and describing members' efforts as part of the progressive movement, MoveOn constructed an image of a community of like-minded people working together. Although most members never participated in offline activism, and those who did were geographically separated from other groups of active members, these messages were meant to establish a sense among individual members that they were part of MoveOn's community as well as the larger progressive community.

Victory Claims

Along with efficacy appeals, MoveOn made explicit pronouncements about victories that had been achieved or were purportedly achievable through the collective effort of MoveOn members. These claims often occurred alongside efficacy appeals, as the following message shows:

As the campaign season enters the final stretch, experts on all sides are taking stock. The short version? We're winning.... [W]e're relying on the energy and commitment of thousands of MoveOn members who are ready for change. It's people-powered politics, and if folks like you are ready to step up to the plate, it's

how we're going to win (9/7/06b e-mail).

Victory appeals also reassured members that their efforts were worthwhile by pointing to tangible results. One day after progressive Senate candidate Ned Lamont defeated Joe Lieberman in Connecticut's Democratic primary in 2006, MoveOn asserted, "we're on a roll.... Lamont's win is the leading edge of a wave we can ride to victory in November. This is what winning feels like. Get used to it" (8/9/06 e-mail). MoveOn was particularly ebullient following Obama's victory in the presidential election in 2008:

Last night, together, we made history. In the sun and the rain... you knocked on doors, made phone calls, and registered people who'd never voted in their lives. And you helped elect President Obama.... [Y]esterday you proved nothing is impossible. If we stand up together and if we fight together and if we believe together, we can change the course of history (11/5/08 e-mail).

Victory claims like these were valuable because they conjured up images of a powerful MoveOn community that helped members maintain their commitment despite being isolated from other members and MoveOn's staff. When combined with efficacy appeals, they functioned as "motivational frames" (Snow and Benford 1988) that convinced members that the aggregation of their individual efforts could indeed lead to victory.

By creating an "us versus them" dynamic, establishing an in-group identity, and encouraging members to view themselves as part of an effective collective effort, MoveOn hoped to create a sense of community among members who participated online. Without actually asking members about their feelings of community, though, MoveOn had no way of knowing whether their rhetorical construction of community was successful. The next section addresses this concern.

COMMUNITY AS PERCEIVED BY MEMBERS

To determine whether MoveOn's attempts to construct community through e-mail translated to actual feelings of community among members, I asked thirty-three MoveOn members if they felt connected to other members and to the organization as a whole. These interviews revealed that many members *did* feel like they were part of a community. Those who participated in offline action were more likely to feel a sense of community, but many members also described a sense of connection that emerged through online participation.

IDENTIFYING WITH THE COMMUNITY "OUT THERE"

As I was conducting interviews with MoveOn members, I noticed how they would often talk about MoveOn or other MoveOn members as being "out there" somewhere. It struck me as an interesting metaphor for the experience of using the internet itself: we react to what we see on the screen as something that is real but is located elsewhere, in some kind of information cloud. The visualization of MoveOn as a community that existed "out there" brought to mind Anderson's (1983) concept of "imagined community." Anderson argued that, in the absence of personal connections, people can still identify as members of a community by forming mental images of what community members are like and then identifying with this imagined community. Because many MoveOn members had little or no contact with other members, they based their images of the national "MoveOn community" upon their own identities and what they could glean from online participation. When possible, these impressions were supplemented with knowledge gained through actual face-to-face contact with other members.

A member named Jeff who had participated in both online and offline actions was one of the first members I interviewed who used the "out there" terminology to describe his connection

to MoveOn's community:

I don't know most of the national members,... but I know they're out there. Now that I know something about the organization, I know it's probably some guy like me in Oklahoma or Pennsylvania or California, or whatever it is. And they probably think like me.... And when I get something from MoveOn, I know that there's all these people at that moment doing this, you know? And so that *does* provide you with a connection.

Jeff's comment was supported by Kelly, an online activist who added that her feeling of community was increased by MoveOn's e-mail communications:

I feel like there's this group of millions of people, a cybergroup.... And I like it when MoveOn writes in their e-mails about the results of—it'll be a day or two after a petition was signed, and they'll tell us how many people responded to it and what the outcome of it was. That does help you know that there's other people out there that have the same belief system you do, at least in certain areas, especially with everything that's going on with the government these days.

Her statement also revealed that some MoveOn members viewed the organization almost like a support group for their political beliefs at a time when, at least while Bush was in office, they felt isolated and afraid of publicly expressing their opinions. As a council coordinator named Norah put it, "with things being so polarized, it's nice to know there's someone you can call who's not going to hang up on you."

A common ideological base was very important to members' sense that they were part of a larger community. "You know you're part of a movement," explained a local organizer named George. "There's a real sense of shared purpose and a shared sense of ideology." When I asked

him what that ideology was based upon, George replied:

I think if you sit down and talk to these people, they're pragmatic progressives who just want to see the country support its people as opposed to support corporations. There's a real element of pragmatism, what we *can* do, that I think is really healthy about MoveOn.

Another local organizer named Kurtis agreed that he felt a sense of connection to other MoveOn members, but clarified, "the connection isn't so much based on MoveOn membership. That's what got it started, but it's based on shared values and shared commitment to actually *doing* things together." In other words, MoveOn membership performed a signaling function, providing a shorthand way of assessing a person's ideological position on national issues. In fact, this assumption of shared values and camaraderie was even integrated into the training of MoveOn's field organizers by Grassroots Campaigns, Incorporated. One organizer named Jeremy recounted how he was told to approach calls to MoveOn members as a friend, not a political organizer whom they had never met:

I was told that when you're calling these folks this is like a long-lost friend.... I was told that's the way MoveOn members see MoveOn. It's this almost familial relationship, insofar as we're like-minded individuals. You know, it's a common vision for the world.... And I found that when I called through MoveOn members, it really *was* that familial relationship. You know, "Hey, I know you, you know me. You work for MoveOn, we're obviously on the same page. Tell me what I can do for ya?"

In contrast to this deep feeling of familiarity, a couple of people said that the connection to other members felt pretty superficial. Interestingly, both used the example of MoveOn bumper

stickers to illustrate their points. A man named James who primarily participated in online activism but had helped plan a couple local events, said of his sense of community, “Sometimes people honk their horns at you and stuff like that because they agree with what your bumper sticker says. But that’s about the extent of it.” Likewise, a local activist named Beth said she felt “a little connection” when other members noticed a MoveOn bumper sticker on her car or a patch on her jacket and came up to introduce themselves. On the other hand, when she lived in Kansas, Beth said several people reacted negatively to her after seeing her bumper sticker because it signified that she was “a liberal” in their minds. Whether people responded with honks and waves or middle fingers, the bumper stickers and other MoveOn paraphernalia served, like MoveOn membership itself, as symbols of a progressive political ideology. Although not all members felt equally strong connections to MoveOn on the basis of this ideological commonality, it helped many members feel like part of a community even when they were not in contact with other members in their area.

EXPERIENCING COMMUNITY THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTION

The majority of members who did express some feeling of community were involved in MoveOn’s offline actions. This was not too surprising, as face-to-face contact has traditionally been the basis for communities, and is still important even though our increasing reliance upon communication technologies has distanced us from one another (Putnam 2000). In MoveOn’s case, these technologies were precisely the tools that enabled members to form communal ties at the local level.

Members who were involved in their local councils were particularly likely to report a sense of community. Norah, the council coordinator quoted earlier, said this feeling emerged:

from doing things together, planning things together, standing together at night in

February holding candles. I tend to have a sense of connection with people I've done something with, a sense of community and solidarity. If you plan an event with someone or you've struggled through something, you do feel closer to them.

George, the local organizer who said MoveOn was based on a pragmatic progressive ideology, described MoveOn members in general as "compatriots," and added, "And if they're Operation Democracy, they're brothers!" He said this feeling of camaraderie emerged from "shared experience," including both offline action and the experience of watching MoveOn be "kicked around" by conservative political commentators and Republican politicians. For these active members, community sentiment grew out of connections made while jointly accomplishing tasks and sharing the burden of occasional public critique of an organization with which they were identified.

Not everyone who reported feeling connected to other members was active in a MoveOn council. Some members who had only recently become involved in MoveOn's offline actions also reported a sense of community. Their stories revealed how they tried to reconcile this new understanding of MoveOn as a "real-life" organization with their previous image of it as a faceless national entity. A woman in her twenties named Lisa became involved with MoveOn after her brother was sent to Iraq. She said she felt disconnected from MoveOn until she attended an anti-war protest in 2007:

I don't really know who the national people are. They're just names on an e-mail.

But now that I've gone to a protest where it was many, many different people and had that visual, I do have more of a sense of being part of a larger group. It's funny. I'm a very experiential person, and that shifted me. I was very moved.

Sometimes the transition into feeling like part of a community was aided by social interactions

with MoveOn members that went beyond the immediate tasks required of a given event. Alexis's perception shifted when she began to socialize with organizers who were running the temporary phone bank in her community during the "Call for Change" effort in 2006:

I got to be friends with the organizers, who were all young like me. We would go out and they would tell stories about what it was like to be part of MoveOn. So I got this perspective on them at the local level and MoveOn as this giant entity. I still think I see MoveOn that way, as such an impersonal entity, but I felt a sense of community with the people I worked with.

Several other people made a similar distinction between MoveOn as an organization and MoveOn as represented by its members. They understood that MoveOn provided the opportunity to meet new people who shared their values and were committed to action, but they did not necessarily feel connected to MoveOn itself. James, who said he felt a superficial connection to other members when they recognized his bumper stickers, described MoveOn as "more a venue than it is an organization with blood and life." He added, "It gives us a sense of identity only insofar as other people are there to talk with about issues." As Lisa said, many members viewed MoveOn's national staff as "just names on an e-mail" until they stepped out from behind their computers and attended a local event. For these members, MoveOn's attempts to create a sense of community through the rhetoric in its e-mails was not successful in its own right, but the e-mails served as prompts to engage in offline actions that *did* lead to the sense of community MoveOn was attempting to foster.

REJECTING THE NOTION OF COMMUNITY

All was not rosy with MoveOn's attempts to create a sense of community. In fact, a significant portion of the people I interviewed rejected the notion that they were members of a

MoveOn community. Some said their lack of participation in local action caused this absence of communal ties, but others pointed the finger at MoveOn itself.

Members who said that lack of local action prevented them from feeling like part of a community fell into two categories. The first group consisted of people who had never or rarely participated in such action. I met one such person at a house party in 2007, which happened to be the first MoveOn event he had attended. When I interviewed him two weeks later, Daniel said he did not feel connected to MoveOn members simply because he did not spend enough time with them. He compared his involvement in MoveOn with an organization in which he was more actively involved, the Unitarian Universalist church:

I would say much more that if I met someone and, you know, didn't know anything about them and they were Unitarian Universalists, then I would feel much more of a connection than with a MoveOn person. And I think it's probably just because I spend a lot more time with that organization and with the people.

Another example was an elderly couple that had recently moved to a new city and did not know anyone in the area. Prior to their move, they had participated solely in MoveOn's online activism, but they decided to use local council events as opportunities to socialize and meet like-minded people. Wilma and her husband, Harold, attended a media training event I helped organize, where they met about a dozen other local members. They mingled and seemed to be well integrated into the group, but later they noted that none of the contacts they made at the meeting led to any further socializing. In our interviews, Harold said that he did not "feel like we're embedded in a functioning group," and his wife expanded on that idea, stating:

When you had this workshop, I felt, "Okay, I have a connection," but it's an unusual connection. I think the internet creates the possibility of what I would call

“cells” for whatever activity there is, or for educational purposes. Our society needs more communal contacts because people are so isolated.

Their comments showed that, while they did not feel integrated into a community at the time of our interview, they did desire to be more connected to other MoveOn members. Indeed, a number of members acknowledged that they wanted to feel like part of the community, but had not yet taken steps to make this happen. In such cases, they did not reject the existence of a MoveOn community, but rather the characterization that they were part of it.

Along with these folks, there were some members who said they once felt connected to MoveOn but no longer identified as part of the community. In most cases, this decline corresponded to a decrease in their level of activity. Barry, for example, had been very active in his MoveOn precinct group during the 2004 “Leave No Voter Behind” voter outreach campaign. By 2006, however, he was not active in MoveOn at all, although he was still on the e-mail list. When I asked him if he felt like part of the MoveOn community, he said he was “aware that there’s people who identify with MoveOn” and claimed that he “was part of that group before the presidential election, but I no longer think of myself as being part of that group.” His decrease in activity resulted from his disappointment that MoveOn had not taken a stronger anti-war stance, and this disconnect from MoveOn’s strategy as well as the lack of personal contact resulting from his non-participation led to the change in his self-categorization as a member of MoveOn’s community.

Perceived changes in MoveOn’s strategy also caused Beth to lose her sense of connection to MoveOn. In her case, the loss of connection resulted from MoveOn’s approach to building community, not from a change in its political agenda. Beth led her local coordinating council for over a year, but eventually curtailed her participation because she felt like MoveOn was not

focusing enough on long-term community building among council members:

When I was involved in the coordinating council I felt pretty connected to a base in this community. I thought it was a very valid part of their agenda, or it could have been, but they really didn't seem to care enough about that.... When they gave that up, or seemed not to care so much anymore, it was really hard. It became more about getting the message out and less about, "Hey, take this month off and do some community-building!" The model they were using was a business, and it felt like we were just doing a job. I started to feel like an employee.

Clearly, she felt an increasing sense of distance from MoveOn's strategy, as symbolized by her repeated use of "they" when referencing MoveOn's leadership. She was also quite disappointed that MoveOn did not seem to value community as much as she did. Unlike some members who did not feel like part of MoveOn's community but still believed such a community existed and was nurtured by MoveOn, Beth began to question MoveOn's interest in building community altogether.

She was not alone. A number of members who had been active in MoveOn's offline actions became quite frustrated with their inability to make lasting contacts with other local members. MoveOn's e-mail system was set up so that most messages were written by paid staff and sent down to members. Members who were not involved in councils had no way to communicate with one another through MoveOn's system, and even those who were council members only had limited access to e-mail other members. Council leaders, for example, could send a message to everyone who had given their e-mail addresses to the council at some point, but they could not send messages to members in their local areas who were not on the council e-

mail list. Although the system was set up this way to protect the privacy of members and prevent anyone from abusing the e-mail system, it also hindered active members' ability to recruit new council members or simply engage in e-mail exchanges that could have created a stronger sense of community among local members.

James, the man who described MoveOn as "a venue" for communication with like-minded people, was very frustrated with MoveOn's e-mail policy, and perceived it as an issue of control:

MoveOn jealously guards the e-mail address list. You can't get an e-mail address from MoveOn no matter how much you threaten.... I understand why they do that, but it makes our job that much more difficult because you have to develop your own e-mail lists. But MoveOn doesn't want that; they want all the communication to be done through them.... Trying to encourage inter-member communication is probably not in the interest of the organization.

Similarly, when I asked a member named Alberta if her lack of connection to other local MoveOn members was due to time constraints or an absence of desire for such connections, she somewhat heatedly replied:

Well, how would I get a hold of them?... They don't have membership lists, and they don't give out names of members, so how would you know? They have no idea how to build a sense of community.

A few members took it upon themselves to forge contacts with each other despite what they perceived to be MoveOn's prohibition of such connections. In one case, a woman named Brenda spoke with another MoveOn member as part of a member-to-member interview program MoveOn ran in order to learn more about its members. She and her partner hit it off and exchanged e-mail addresses, even though they both had the impression that "we weren't

supposed to stay in touch.” The fact that Brenda and other members like her felt that such communication was frowned upon revealed rather pointedly that even though the rhetoric in MoveOn’s e-mails was designed to create a sense of community, the very system through which these e-mails were sent undermined such claims.

Lastly, some members believed that MoveOn was inherently unable to build a “real” community because it was an internet-based organization. In some ways, this critique cut most deeply, because it rejected the possibility that community sentiment could be created through e-mail and websites. When I asked a member named Adam, who had only participated in online action, if MoveOn’s e-mails made him feel connected to other MoveOn members, he replied, “No, it just feels like I’m taking a quick little survey.... I’ve always seen myself as someone on the outside of it looking in.” Another online activist, Justin, said that if he ran into another MoveOn member at a party, he “wouldn’t necessarily feel connected because we’re both MoveOn members. It’s just, like, we’re on the same listserv, we get the same e-mails, maybe we could have a discussion on a certain point.” The top-down nature of MoveOn’s e-mails and absence of biographical information or photos of staff members on the website meant that many members viewed the organization as an impersonal, abstract entity. One online activist described her attempts to picture other MoveOn members and staff as “an exercise in fantasy,” while another used *The Wizard of Oz* as a metaphor for MoveOn’s impersonality, saying, “it does make you wonder, who are the leadership? Who’s behind the screen? Who’s the Oz, the Wizard?”

CONCLUSION

The top-down structure of MoveOn’s e-mail system allowed it to shape members’ impressions of “the MoveOn community” through clever use of language that painted a picture of millions of people working together to make the country a better place. The problem with

such a system, though, was that it stymied members' attempts to establish long-term connections, and made many members feel like MoveOn was not truly interested in helping them create genuine, local-level social bonds. At the heart of this dilemma was the issue of control. When community was something that could be created by MoveOn's staff through rhetoric in e-mail messages, it was still very much under the control of organizational leadership. If MoveOn enabled members to communicate person-to-person through its e-mail system or invested more deeply in local community building events, this control was lost.

The concern with control was not about community formation as such, but about the loss of message control that might occur if members began forming local groups that acted independently of MoveOn's agenda. In short, MoveOn viewed community (or at least the perception of community) as a means to achieve its political goals. At the same time, it recognized that the very structure of the internet worked against this model of centralized control, by allowing like-minded people to communicate freely and make connections without any need for oversight. MoveOn addressed this issue by using the internet to construct an image of community even as it closed off avenues for real community-building to take place. It also gave members opportunities to meet offline, but made sure that they stayed on message by giving them specific tasks or talking points that reflected the organization's overall agenda.

Despite the fact that many members experienced little if any sense of genuine communal connections to one another, participation affected most active members' sense of self. In the next chapter, I explain how processes of activist identity development and reinforcement occurred among MoveOn members.

CHAPTER 5: THE DEVELOPMENT AND ENACTMENT OF ACTIVIST IDENTITIES AMONG MOVEON MEMBERS

In this chapter, I explore how participation in MoveOn.org, an online progressive political organization, affected the identities of MoveOn members. This analysis is rooted in symbolic interactionist analyses of the self (Blumer 1969; Cooley 1902; Goffman 1959, 1963; James [1890] 1983; Mead [1934] 1962; Stryker 1980) as well as studies of the relationship of social movement participation to self-identity (Armato and Marsiglio 2002; Bernstein 1997; Broad 2002; Einwohner 2002; Gamson 1995; Hunt and Benford 1994; Kiecolt 2000; Snow and McAdam 2000; Stryker, White, and Owens 2000; Taylor and Whittier 1992). In particular, I draw upon Gecas's concept of "value identity," which he defines as self-definitions that "characterize the moral or political or philosophical stand that persons take and in terms of which define themselves" (2000:98).

Some MoveOn members I interviewed had never been involved in political activism, while others had long histories of working for social and political causes. These two groups, which I refer to respectively as "newcomers" and "veterans," followed paths to and through MoveOn that were similar but distinct. Drawing on fifty-two interviews, I follow these paths and show how participation in MoveOn helped newcomers develop activist identities and supported veterans' pre-existing activist identities. These insights add to the literature on the formation and function of activist identities in social movements (Bobel 2007; Downton and Wehr 1998; Kelly and Breinlinger 1995; McAdam 1989; Simon et al. 1998).

PRECIPITATING FACTORS: EXPERIENCE AND WORLDVIEW

Newcomers and veterans differed in their experiences prior to MoveOn. Newcomers had little, if any, history of social or political activism, while some veterans had been activists for

most of their lives. What made the groups similar was a shared belief that people had a responsibility to get active in political issues if they wanted to see change occur.

NEWCOMERS

For a few newcomers, their work with MoveOn was their first taste of activism. This was the case for Darcy, a regional coordinator in her fifties who began her activist career in the fall of 2007 with MoveOn's voter outreach campaign during the Kentucky governor's race:

They called me and asked if I was interested. At that point I was just ready to do something. I was pretty much fed up with the Bush administration, so I said, "Yes, I'll come down there and help you." I met with a bunch of MoveOn members and we did some canvassing, and then they made me the precinct captain. Then I got a call in January [2008] asking me if I wanted to be a regional coordinator. I had never been politically involved ever, so I really jumped in over my head.

Unlike Darcy, most newcomers had at least volunteered with churches or community groups, but they did not define this work as activism. A local activist in her late twenties named Lisa, for example, had participated in several community-oriented actions but did not think of these as "activism" until my question reframed the activities in this light:

Personally I don't really call it activism, but I guess it is. I was really involved in a youth group in my high school and junior high years through my church. That got me volunteering a lot and going into lower income neighborhoods. We did neighborhood clean ups, reaching out to community members, stuff like that. So I would say that sort of triggered my awareness of being involved in activism.

Newcomers also frequently recalled witnessing their parents discuss and/or participate in social

and political causes when they were children. Annie, a regional coordinator in her late twenties, said her parents contributed to her social awareness:

[In my family] politics were discussed but never engaged in. I mean, my parents went to the protests during the Sixties and Seventies and the whole nine yards, but they were never really gung-ho. My mother was involved with a non-profit that gives free summer vacations to poor kids. We would also go to folk concerts that Pete Seeger organized. So I wasn't taken to protests when I was ten, but I was being educated in the art of social consciousness. The idea of helping people make their lives better has definitely been part of my culture.

Although their levels of political consciousness and engagement varied, newcomers shared a general participatory worldview. They believed that people should actively try to improve the world and their conditions within it, rather than simply hoping that others would do the necessary work. This worldview made them prime candidates for social movement recruitment.

VETERANS

Unlike newcomers, veterans had more extensive histories of activism. In fact, one local organizer named Susan had participated in civil rights marches and sit-ins, marched on Washington with the Students for a Democratic Society in 1965 to protest the Vietnam War, worked with women's peace groups and the National Organization for Women, counseled sexual assault victims, been arrested for protesting at a nuclear test site, and helped organize protests for both the Gulf War and the current Iraq War. Her life story epitomized many veterans' lifelong dedication to activism. It also illustrated another common thread among this group: emphasis on political participation outside of the party structure. Veterans generally distrusted the Democratic Party, but they also recognized that their opportunities to make effective change in national

politics were tied to the reality of two-party rule in the United States, as the following comments by a local activist named Truman indicate:

I have been involved in radical politics and social change for my whole adult life, pretty much. And it's always been an issue about how to push society to change and still be practical in some way. Now, I have strongly disliked the Democratic Party, 'cause it seems to never take a position that promotes progressive change and it absorbs the energies of many people who'd like to make some changes in society. At the same time, efforts to work outside of it are often not very practical.

Not all veterans fit this profile of the Sixties radical turned twenty-first century pragmatist. Some, like sixty-six year-old local activist Alberta, had participated in institutionalized politics. She had worked on a senatorial campaign and was very involved with Howard Dean's 2004 campaign before becoming active in MoveOn during the 2006 congressional election. For her, MoveOn was only one of several means to work for Democratic candidates, but her loyalty ultimately rested with the Democratic Party:

I belong to four Democratic parties in the state. I used to be chair of the Democratic Party in the UK, and I was on the board of Democrats Abroad for four or six years. I believe in the political party process. I'm a Democrat, and I don't want something that's too amorphous. I want to get out the vote, and I want to do it through the Democratic Party, if possible. MoveOn is not the center of my universe.

Many veterans who came of age in the Nineties had also built up significant histories of activism. A regional coordinator named Kevin, for example, had already been active in an anti-tobacco campaign for eight years prior to his work with MoveOn, despite the fact that he was

only twenty-two years old at the time of our interview. Another regional coordinator who was also in his twenties had spent many years volunteering every day at a battered women's shelter and a home for people living with AIDS. The story of Darren, a local activist in his thirties, is representative of how many younger veterans shifted from humanitarian work into political activism:

In high school and college, I was involved in my church quite a bit, and through that... I worked with mentally handicapped adults [and] children who were victims of HIV/AIDS. I worked a lot with low-income youth, and with adjudicated youth through Outward Bound. And then I joined the Peace Corps and went to South America.... [In 2000] I sent e-mails to everybody I knew, saying, "Don't vote for this man [George W. Bush]. He's gonna be trouble." And then when the attacks of 9/11 happened, I heard the voices of the hawks in Washington and it scared me. I started wearing a black ribbon... as my own little form of protest.... And then around 2002 or 2003, when we were ramping up for the Iraq War, I visited Washington, D.C., with some Peace Corps friends and staged a protest outside the White House. I held up a sign that said, "Dear Mr. Bush: Who would Jesus bomb?"

Veterans' activism exposed them to leftist perspectives (Marxism, environmentalism, pacifism, and so on) that fundamentally framed how they viewed the world, and also integrated them into activist networks that reinforced their political engagement. At the same time, they knew from their prior experiences working outside the political system that idealistic protest, while personally fulfilling, often did little to change national policies, especially when an antagonistic administration was in power. Veterans were dedicated to political change, but

wanted to go about it in a way that would maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of their activism. Such circumstances made MoveOn's approach to political activism appealing.

CATALYZING EVENTS

Prior to joining MoveOn, some members had not participated in activism because constraining factors, such as full-time jobs and families, made them "biographically unavailable" (McAdam 1986) for protest. Others were inactive simply because they did not feel that the political situation in the United States during the Clinton years was dire enough to get involved. Several events in the first decade of the twenty-first century provided the "moral shock" necessary to increase the perceived urgency of political activism. Jasper (1997:106) explains that a moral shock occurs, "when an unexpected event or piece of information raises such a sense of outrage in a person that she becomes inclined toward political action." This event causes people to recognize the disjuncture between their values and reality, and compels them to try to change current conditions to bring them into line with their values (Jasper 1997, 1998).

NEWCOMERS

Newcomers' outrage was fueled by virtually all aspects of the Bush Administration's policies and practices: the controversial way Bush became president in 2000, the administration's post-9/11 hard-line militaristic response and incursion into civil liberties with the Patriot Act, perceived failures in domestic policies, and, of course, the Iraq war. Members like Harold, a local activist in his eighties, were completely disgusted with George W. Bush:

The country has reached a point where change is essential. I consider George W.

Bush to be the worst president in American history.... I have great difficulty knowing *anything* that Bush has done that you might say has a long-term benefit.

The last seven years has been one bad thing after another, it seems to me. So

that's the background for the interest in MoveOn.

Likewise, a regional coordinator named Bruce explained how he and his wife decided to get active in MoveOn out of frustration with the Republican Party:

We were so disenchanted with the Republican Party and their stance on a whole bunch of issues that we were pissed off and decided to get active on the other side.... It made quite an impression on some of the other MoveOn people, because we got active very quickly. It's kind of like admitting you're an ex-Nazi.

The strongest underlying motivator for getting politically active was the Iraq War. Some people got involved in the anti-war movement because their relatives were being deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, but the majority did so for less personal reasons. Moral outrage over the costs of the war (both in dollars and lives) overwhelmed newcomers like Linda, an online activist and mother of three:

Keepin' our military over there and spending billions of dollars a month on a war that we went into based on false information, and we haven't really even begun to come out of it. We're spending, what is it, \$2 billion a month for this war? What about education? What about our country? And the health insurance issue?... The money that goes out every month and the lives that are lost drives me nuts.

Moral shock about the Iraq War and the Bush Administration's foreign and domestic policies grew into a "perfect storm" of outrage that made newcomers feel it was imperative that they do something to stop the Bush Administration's negative practices.

VETERANS

Similar to the newcomers, veterans were shocked and appalled by the events of 2000-2008. Though many veterans had never reduced their participation in movements, some had decreased

their activity in the Eighties and Nineties to raise families and build careers. The war and other actions by the Bush Administration reactivated these people. A local activist named Jeff, for example, had taken time to focus on raising his two children after a divorce. However, he was inspired to get politically active once again after the 2000 election:

I thought the 2000 election was stolen, and I knew enough about the Constitution to, I couldn't figure out the [Supreme] Court's judgment. You know, 5-to-4, that really pissed me off, and I knew that that was wrong. And that started it, you know.

Other veterans became more active because changes in their lives allowed them to engage in political activism. Lawrence, for example, was a self-proclaimed "workaholic" who had only signed MoveOn's online petitions prior to changing jobs and reducing his hours. With his newly found free time, he began volunteering for local MoveOn actions and quickly became a regional coordinator, the highest volunteer position in MoveOn. Several veterans also increased their activity after retiring. One regional coordinator named Louise had been active in the student anti-war and civil rights movements during the Sixties, and had worked for George McGovern's presidential campaign in 1972. However, while focusing on her career and raising two sons in the Eighties and Nineties she was not involved in activism. MoveOn's 2006 get-out-the-vote effort became the catalyst for her reengagement with politics:

I heard about MoveOn in July of 2006. I got a call from a volunteer to come down and work one day at the office in [name of city omitted]. I went and did that and I've never stopped. [laughs] Before that, I was getting increasingly frustrated listening to the news and pacing the house saying, "I can't stand this! I can't stand this!" So the call came and said, "You want to come down and see what we're

doing?,” and I said, “Absolutely!” I was really motivated to do something.

Even veterans who had never reduced their participation in activism were energized by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They saw their activism with MoveOn as part of a larger struggle against the United States’ violent foreign policy. Greg was a self-employed writer and online activist who had been active in leftist politics since 1968, when he participated in the infamous protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. He strongly opposed George W. Bush’s choice to invade Iraq:

I think anyone that can really see outside of Fox News and the propaganda [will see] that this little coward is hiding behind an army and using them for his own sadistic pleasures. He’s into killing and that’s all there is to it. If people don’t see it, I don’t know what to say to people like that. They [Bush’s supporters] went for simplicity and they got it, and it’s given rise to a redneck intellectualism that is just ridiculous.

Likewise, Darren, the local activist whose participation in MoveOn was preceded by work with the Peace Corps and his church, explained that the goal of his activism was “bigger than just getting out of the Iraq or Afghanistan war; it’s the end of the military-industrial complex that creates perpetual war.”

In summary, the Bush Administration’s actions supplied the “moral shock” (Jasper 1997, 1998) that energized newcomers and veterans, who then began seeking opportunities to get politically active.

JOINING MOVEON

Most members, including newcomers and veterans, did not recall exactly when or how they first heard about MoveOn. Because of the low threshold for membership (simply signing an

e-petition made one a member), many peoples' entry into MoveOn was rather casual or even inadvertent. Those who did remember said they came across MoveOn through a number of avenues. Newcomers' and veterans' paths to MoveOn were similar in several ways, but there were also important differences.

NEWCOMERS

A few newcomers discovered MoveOn online, as was the case for Linda, the mother of three who was outraged at the costs of the war:

I was just searching for something, some way for me to get involved in the political process. I just searched on the internet and found their website, and read about them and what they do. And I thought it was a perfect fit for me.

Others first heard about MoveOn through participation in other progressive political organizations. Lisa, for example, was a college student and online activist in her twenties who discovered MoveOn through Howard Dean's presidential campaign. When she learned that MoveOn had endorsed Dean in its 2003 online primary, she researched MoveOn and joined its e-mail list.

Most newcomers joined MoveOn after hearing about it from friends and family. Because the person providing the information was a trusted source who knew them well, members assumed that MoveOn was a legitimate organization that represented their views. Della, an online activist in her fifties, joined as a result of friends' forwarded e-mails:

I have friends who have an activist inclination, and they forwarded e-mails to me.

I decided to get on their e-mail list based on the content of the e-mail that was forwarded to me. They say, "You wanna get on our mailing list, sign up." So I said, "Okay, I want to get on your e-mail list," and signed up.

Similarly, Andrea, a forty-one year-old local activist, heard about MoveOn through conversations with influential others during the 2004 election season:

My brother was talking to me about those bake sales that were going on. They had all these funny names. And then a neighbor started talking to me about it in terms of voter legitimacy, like a paper trail and all that. She had gotten involved. So that's how I started hearing about MoveOn, and then I went to the website and signed up.

Whether or not newcomers remembered how they got involved in MoveOn, they felt that MoveOn was a convenient way to get involved in the political process. This sentiment was expressed by Justin, an online activist in his thirties:

It feels like in a lot of ways our system is set up to shut out people from participating in democracy. Whereas, this organization's going out there and sending a petition to your desk, and all you have to do is click on it, maybe write a personal message if you want. It's taken the grunt work out of it.

Beyond matters of convenience, though, members believed that MoveOn's size magnified their voices and gave them the power to influence national political decisions. Della, the online activist mentioned above who joined MoveOn as a result of a friend's e-mail, said:

I think MoveOn has a powerful voice and they're doing important work, and they stand up for what I believe in. I feel they increase the significance of *my* voice because they get together millions or thousands of people to do the work they're doing. So I'm not just an isolated voice; I have the power of numbers.

This combination of size, convenience, and outspoken progressive political opinions was the key to MoveOn's ability to draw in newcomers and keep them involved.

VETERANS

Many veterans found out about MoveOn through similar channels as newcomers, including conversations with friends and family, forwarded e-mails, and a “buzz” about MoveOn within other activist organizations. Because these stories are so similar, I have opted to omit redundant comments in order to better address how veterans’ joining experiences differed. Veterans reported more often than newcomers that media coverage helped them discover MoveOn. Although it seems like media coverage could have greater influence in spreading MoveOn’s name to those not already embedded in activist networks, it also stands to reason that people who were already involved in political action paid more attention to political news and were more attuned to what was being said about progressive organizations. A good example of this was the experience of Jeff, the local activist with two children mentioned earlier. He recounted hearing about MoveOn while visiting his brother, a right-wing Republican who was listening to talk radio at the time:

Somebody was commenting on MoveOn. You know, kind of the classic [adopts a mock southern accent], “All those Michael Moore, MoveOn freaks!” or whatever the standard thing was. That was when I first heard about MoveOn. That was probably around 2000. I didn’t know what they did and didn’t know who they were, but I didn’t believe who I was listening to.

Veterans were somewhat more likely than newcomers to be early adopters of MoveOn, although the majority joined MoveOn between 2004 and 2008, when it gained national attention for its outspoken anti-war position and election work. Several people I interviewed received MoveOn’s very first message about the Senate censure of Bill Clinton in 1998. Others joined during the 2000 election season. Even though MoveOn did not run a get-out-the-vote program or

raise significant funds in 2000, some veterans, such as a seventy-two year-old online activist named Brenda, saw it as an outlet for activism because they respected the position it took during the Clinton censure debate:

I was living in Mexico during the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Although I wasn't active in it then, I said, "Gosh, we should do something," and somebody told me about this website. And then it wasn't until the 2000 election, when I realized he [George W. Bush] was gonna run, that I actually gave them my name and started to do something.

John, a local activist in his mid-sixties who had participated in anti-nuclear and alternative religious movements, joined in 2004 because he was impressed by MoveOn's vocal opposition to the Iraq war:

I felt really powerless about stopping the war when I was not a member of MoveOn. It was the idea that here's a group of three-million-plus people that are all interested in accomplishing the same goal. That's the same attraction as religion, basically: "We're gonna save the world," or at least try to. So that's why I joined.

In keeping with their antagonism toward party politics, veterans expressed more often than newcomers that MoveOn's position outside of the party system was an important factor in their decisions to participate. Susan, whose activist history stretched back to the Fifties, explained why her husband and she chose to participate in MoveOn's 2004 election work:

We wanted to be active in the election, but we didn't want to be active in the Democratic Party. We got involved in MoveOn because they seemed to us to be left of the Democrats. It was simple: anything to the left of the Democrats was

okay with me. I wanted to put my energy into getting out the vote against Bush any way I could possibly do it that wasn't in the Democratic Party.

Likewise, local organizer Kurtis said he “liked the progressive but not partisan angle” of MoveOn’s political work.

Veterans were also more attracted by what they perceived to be MoveOn’s grassroots approach to political action. Given their histories of participation in activist groups, veterans like Willow, a local activist with a background in anti-war and feminist activism, craved the opportunity to get active with like-minded people on a local level for national issues:

It was people who were ready to deal with the important issues that affect real people in the United States and not waste time with bullshit. Not who we can get elected, or this scandal, or that thing. It’s issues like healthcare, the transparent vote, and the war. That’s what attracted me: people organizing on a local level, grassroots people taking care of things that we don’t really have the power to influence through our current political system in this country.

Though veterans’ motivations for joining MoveOn were similar to those of newcomers in many ways, their activist backgrounds made them more attuned to media coverage of social movement groups and drew them to MoveOn because of its stance as a non-partisan, grassroots political organization.

GETTING ACTIVE IN MOVEON

Given their histories of political involvement, I expected veterans to be more active in MoveOn than newcomers. In reality, both groups were active in online and offline activism to about the same degree, though for slightly different reasons.

NEWCOMERS

Some newcomers faced family and job responsibilities that constrained their activism. One mother of three named Linda who also worked part-time as a loan officer was limited to online activism by her family and work responsibilities:

I participate in most of the petitions and donate occasionally when I can. I haven't been able to join actual community events, but I hope to at some point. It's just my time. I've got soccer three days a week. I need to get my kids to practice and games. My schedule gets kind of crazy... Sometimes I read [MoveOn's e-mail messages] at three-o'clock at night.

Although she did not have children, a local activist named Andrea related that the nature of her job prevented her from getting more active in MoveOn:

Basically all I really act on is signing the petitions. I can't call [congressional offices] during my work hours because I work for the government. It's not allowed.... Well, I made calls for MoveOn for the [2006] senatorial elections. I went to one MoveOn meeting after that, but it was just people saying they were gonna read different newspapers or write letters to the editors. And I just sort of disengaged. That was it. I mean, I barely have time to read my mail, you know?

Newcomers who got more deeply involved in MoveOn typically fell into two categories: 1) younger people who were in college, unemployed, or working part-time; and 2) middle-aged or elderly people who had an "empty nest" and were retired, unemployed, or working part-time. These people often rose quickly to leadership positions because they had the extra time to dedicate to MoveOn's local organizing efforts, which frequently required regional coordinators to volunteer ten hours or more per week. A typical pattern of escalating involvement was that of Doug, who got involved in his late twenties while he was working at a job that allowed him

some free time:

I was kind of a lurker on their e-mail list until the 2006 election. I responded to an e-mail about phone banking and got invited into the office here. I figured I'd do a couple hours and be done with it, but I wound up coming in just about every night between September first and Election Day.... From there I was asked to be council coordinator. I did that for two years.... Then they were ramping up for the [2008] presidential election, and I was asked to be regional coordinator. After a little bit of going back and forth, I decided to do that because I thought it was really important to be able to have a role in growing and adding councils.

Another newcomer named Darcy became a regional coordinator only two months after attending her first MoveOn event. MoveOn's request for participation came at an opportune time in her life, after her children had left the house and she was only working part-time. As she put it, "I would have said 'yes' to any group that was getting involved and doing something. It was just sort of serendipity. I was ready and they were there, and they asked me and I said 'yes.'" Interestingly, both Doug and Darcy had stepped down from regional coordinating at the time of our interviews because they had started new jobs that demanded much more of their time.

Less commonly, some newcomers with full-time jobs or families also took on high levels of responsibility. For these people the combination of a participatory worldview and a sense of urgency convinced them that they needed to get involved despite their work or family obligations. One such individual was a forty-four year-old man named Peter who had a full-time job, a wife, and a twelve-year-old son. He jumped at the opportunity to be a regional coordinator because he felt it was a productive way to use the anger he felt toward the Bush Administration:

I worked with [my field organizer] doing an event. It was a petition delivery

against war with Iran. And then he asked me right away to be a regional coordinator. I was ready. I had been angry for some period, an onset of rage, barking at people around me. I was ready to hear somebody asking me to focus that energy. It was perfect timing. I tell people it's like therapy for me, having a way to channel this anger. Not so much anymore, but while Bush was president. Annie, the newcomer whose former activist parents took her to Pete Seeger concerts as a child, also experienced this sense of urgency. Although she was busy, Annie found the regional coordinator role uniquely suited to daily routines, and made an effort to fit activism into her busy schedule:

As a regional coordinator, I wasn't really going to events. I was organizing the heck out of them. At the same time I was doing about six other things: being an elementary school teacher, and I'm also an actor. So I was doing those things all at the same time. Often MoveOn events are in the middle of the day, and I can't exactly tell twenty-one children that I'll be back in a few hours. But I can get other people to do them.

For these busy people, MoveOn's internet- and telephone-based organizing system allowed them the flexibility to engage in activism in the spaces between their work and family obligations.

VETERANS

While many veterans were involved in offline activism and organizing, an equal number participated primarily or exclusively in MoveOn's online forms of activism. I assumed that veterans would be more involved than newcomers because they were committed to activist lifestyles and identities. However, as I dug deeper I started to understand why some veterans were not highly active in MoveOn's offline activities.

Through their histories of participating in social movements, veterans had built up skill sets and social networks that were well suited to MoveOn's offline actions. Some searched for organizational opportunities to put their activist skills to use, and often sought or were asked to take on leadership positions. A typical pattern was the experience of John, the local organizer who began participating in MoveOn in 2004 after retiring and moving back to his home state:

Not long after moving back I started getting more active in MoveOn and was eventually invited to a demonstration. I thought, "Yeah, that would be great," so I went to that. Then somewhere along the line I was invited to a council meeting, so I went to it. I liked the people there and felt that this was something I could do, so I started volunteering for stuff. I was made council coordinator in very short order because I have the time and I'm responsible enough that I can do stuff that it's hard to find people to do.

Another veteran named Kurtis had been active in his community for over twenty years, and had become very close with many local activists. He brought these network connections to MoveOn when he became a precinct leader during its 2004 voter outreach campaign:

As the '04 election came along, I was dead-set against Bush getting re-elected and wanted to do something to help with that. I heard about the No Voter Left Behind program that they were instituting and there being a need for precinct leaders, and I thought, "Okay, that's something I can do." And because I have a network of people I know in town here I was able to kind of enlist some of their help too.

Other veterans restricted their participation to MoveOn's online forms of activism. These veterans faced family and job responsibilities as well as other challenges that hindered offline participation. One example was Greg, the interviewee who protested at the 1968 Democratic

National Convention in Chicago. Despite the fact that he was unmarried and had no kids, a disability that left him in a wheelchair made it difficult for him to participate in offline activism:

On occasion, through e-mail they've let me know about local members getting together, but I haven't made it. I just didn't want to make the hassle to go over there. I'd probably go with a cane, but still, it's twice the effort of a normal person. If I had the legs I'd go, but, you know, standing is a great part of a lot of these things [public events]. So I do a lot of the internet.

Similarly, one regional coordinator I knew was unable to attend MoveOn events because he was quadriplegic and needed to be attached to his breathing tube at all times. Nevertheless, he was able to organize MoveOn events from his home using the internet and phones. Although these two examples are more dramatic than the typical experiences of veterans, they illustrate that online participation did not necessarily entail less commitment or a weaker form of activism.

Many veterans were also involved with other activist organizations, which limited the time they could dedicate to MoveOn. One veteran named Deborah restricted her MoveOn activism to online petitions because she was already going door-to-door for the Sierra Club and making calls to voters for the Democratic Party. As the 2008 election season got into full swing, this competition for veterans' time and energy became particularly apparent as many MoveOn members joined Barack Obama's campaign. In my role as a regional coordinator during the election season, I noticed that it became increasingly difficult to recruit people for MoveOn calling parties or other events because they were already doing similar things through the Obama campaign. This was the case with Nancy, a local activist who decided to volunteer for Obama rather than MoveOn:

My focus now is more on getting Obama elected. I'm more passionate about

Obama. In fact, if I'm remembering correctly, MoveOn sent a thing [an e-mail message] and wanted some phone banking, and I didn't do it because I thought, "I'm doing it through Obama's [online system]." So I think right now I'm feeling less connected to MoveOn and more connected to Obama, and once this [election] is done it will probably shift back and then MoveOn will be my vehicle for issues.

On the other hand, several veterans did dedicate themselves to MoveOn as a primary outlet for their activism despite other activities. Kurtis, for example, was a council coordinator for several years while concurrently holding down a full-time job and chairing his local union. Another council coordinator named Beth balanced her MoveOn responsibilities with full-time attendance at a university and three part-time jobs. As mentioned earlier, Kurtis was deeply integrated into his local activist community and had a decades-long history of activism. Beth did not have either of these traits, but she came from a politically active family and had a brother who had been deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. Their lifelong dedication to activism, integration into local activist networks, a history of political awareness in members' families, and/or a personal connection to issues were enough to counteract the pull of their other responsibilities. These factors mitigated the competing demands of work, school, and family.

Even though I was surprised to see that veterans were no more involved in MoveOn than newcomers, when I considered issues of "biographical availability" (McAdam 1986) and competing commitments to other activist organizations, it made sense why some of these dedicated activists were not more highly active in MoveOn. Many veterans saw MoveOn as one convenient outlet for their activist participation among many possibilities, and only some decided to make MoveOn their primary activist organization.

DEVELOPING AND REINFORCING ACTIVIST IDENTITIES

Participation in MoveOn had important effects upon the identities of the vast majority of MoveOn members I interviewed. Newcomers' participation led to the development of new activist identities. For veterans, the experience was not transformative because they already saw themselves as activists, but it allowed them to reinforce these activist identities.

NEWCOMERS

Newcomers credited MoveOn with giving them the skills and confidence necessary to view themselves as activists. When I asked a regional coordinator named Peter if he felt like an activist, he replied:

Yes, I do, and I owe it to MoveOn. Before [joining MoveOn], I didn't feel like I was actually doing anything useful as far as moving the country in the right direction. But now I feel like I've been effective. I feel like other people have responded to me well as a leader and just as a fellow citizen. It's actually made me feel pretty good about myself.

They also reported that MoveOn had been a critical catalyst in changing them from people who *felt* like action was important to people who *acted* on their convictions. One person who succinctly expressed this idea was Katrina, a forty-nine year-old local activist who had participated in MoveOn's election work in 2004, 2006, and 2008:

I think [participation in MoveOn is] very important, because it's not just about the election, it's about my value system. MoveOn is a venue for me to act upon what I value. It's just exactly what I would create if I were to think anything up. When I see people who have such passion and *live* their passion and their values, I can really connect with that and it's important to me.

Most newcomers said they planned to continue participating in political activism and organizing,

and a couple changed careers as a result of their work with MoveOn. One former regional coordinator named Kathy said MoveOn “helped me find my true self and tapped into the organizer I had in me.” Although she had been uninvolved in activism prior to MoveOn, she decided to dedicate herself to political organizing and got a job as the executive director of a non-profit organization in her state, a position she said she would have never considered before MoveOn. Likewise, a local activist and former regional coordinator named George switched from a career in sales and marketing to working as a labor union organizer.

Activist identity development did not always correspond to high levels of participation in MoveOn. Although most newcomers who developed activist identities were very involved in MoveOn’s offline activism and organizing, some less involved members also developed activist identities. One such person was Lisa, the college student who joined MoveOn after hearing about it through Howard Dean’s presidential campaign. Her involvement in MoveOn was driven by the fact that her brother had been deployed to Iraq. When the military wanted to deploy him for a second time, she organized a letter-writing campaign and successfully halted his redeployment. She got involved in some of MoveOn’s anti-war vigils and protests, but mostly just read MoveOn’s e-mails and occasionally signed petitions. Still, Lisa saw MoveOn as an important component of her budding activist identity:

MoveOn’s been a channel of activism and a source of inspiration.... It’s been a nice backup to what I am doing in my personal life [her letter-writing campaign], just to know that other people are doing it as well, and that people care and stand beside you. It gives me the confidence to continue that work and to start conversations with people about that [the war] and not be afraid to get into it.

Newcomers indicated that their emerging activist identities would last beyond their work

with MoveOn. By the time I interviewed them, quite a few members had moved on to other organizations or had taken breaks from activism due to new jobs, health problems, or other factors. Nonetheless, many said that they still felt like activists even though they were not participating in activism at the moment. One former regional coordinator named Gary had stepped down after six months because the position was taking too much time away from his job search. Nonetheless, he said, “Even though I’m out of MoveOn right now, I still feel like an activist. I can still use the skills I learned, and, you know, being surrounded by people doing this stuff really made me more politically aware.” Sarah, another former regional coordinator, said she “felt like [she] had to break up with MoveOn” after the 2008 election due to what she described as “burn out.” Even though she quit her regional coordinating position and unsubscribed from MoveOn’s e-mail list, Sarah said she felt like an activist and anticipated participating in activism after taking a break to regain her energy.

VETERANS

Through MoveOn, veterans were able to continue careers of value-based actions and reinforce their activist identities. That being said, MoveOn was not necessarily as important to veterans as it was to newcomers in this regard because veterans’ activist identities were bolstered by years of experience and concurrent involvement in other activist organizations. Darren, the anti-war activist and former Peace Corps volunteer, explained:

Even when I was canvassing with MoveOn, my construction of self was not tied up with MoveOn per se, but was tied up with being an activist. I was an activist first, and a MoveOn member only as a means to support being an activist. It was a means of doing what I believed in doing. So MoveOn as an organization served a role, but in my perception of self it doesn’t rank very high of things that have

helped me find who I am.

Sandy, a regional coordinator who had an extensive activist history, expressed a similar sentiment. She had been involved in civil rights boycotts as a high school student and had recently retired from her job as a fundraiser for non-profit organizations that benefitted women's shelters. Moreover, she had taken in several foster children who she had met through her work with these shelters. In comparison to this work, her participation in MoveOn seemed relatively unimportant in her self-development. As she put it, "MoveOn is the political effort I'm most committed to at the moment, but it may not always be important to me. I was an activist before MoveOn and will be an activist after MoveOn."

Some veterans did rely upon their participation in MoveOn to strengthen their activist identities. One woman named Joy had opposed the military and economic intrusion of the United States into Central America during the Eighties and participated in the marijuana legalization movement in the Nineties. When she had a child, though, her activism gave way to mothering. As she became more involved in MoveOn from 2006 onward, her activist identity reemerged as an important part of her overall sense of self. Joy said that she felt like "MoveOn found a lost activist" when they asked her to volunteer. One local activist in her twenties named Alexis clarified how participation in MoveOn added a political dimension to her activist identity:

I had a sense of an activist self [before MoveOn], but it was rooted in working for things that benefitted kids. It's not that I don't still value kids, but I think now I see it as more respectable to work toward political aims than to be like, "I volunteered for a day care center."... I'll tell stories to people about my interest in politics, and I'll sort of come around to it, like, "I made calls for them. I did this."... So it's definitely incredibly important in terms of my activist and my

political selves.

In contrast, some veterans grew unhappy with MoveOn because they felt its model of organizing did not adequately draw upon their activist skills, and therefore did not give them opportunities to reinforce their activist identities. MoveOn prefabricated signs, press releases, and talking points for events in order to keep a consistent message across hundreds or even thousands of simultaneous events. Although newcomers found these materials helpful, some veterans felt stifled and thought MoveOn was micro-managing what was ostensibly grassroots activism. These people left MoveOn in favor of organizations that they believed would draw upon the full range of their activist skills, as this comment from former local activist Alberta illustrates:

I don't think that I'll put much more energy into MoveOn. They don't understand me, and I probably don't understand them. They're asking me to just be part of a crowd and just do whatever they need. I'm an action-oriented person with organization and management skills. I think my skills are better used by organizations like the Red Cross and Human Rights Watch.

Along with this frustration over MoveOn's event planning model, some veterans believed MoveOn was capitulating to the Democratic Party. As mentioned earlier, many veterans distrusted political parties and joined MoveOn because they thought it was a political outsider. When MoveOn appeared to be going along with the Democrats on issues that were near and dear to their hearts, veterans like Barry, a former local activist, decided to stop participating:

I don't like them very much anymore in one *very* important respect, and that is that I think they're too moderate for my taste.... As far as I'm concerned, the Iraq War is *by far* the overwhelmingly important issue right now. That's where the

entire focus of my political interest is at this point, and that's not theirs. So I'm not on their wavelength anymore.

Overall, veterans viewed MoveOn as an important avenue for expressing their activist identities. In keeping with Lichterman's (1996) "personalized politics," they were not loyal to the organization, except to the extent that it provided them opportunities to enact their values and reinforce their identities. Thus, when they disagreed with MoveOn's organizing model or its positions on issues, they simply joined other groups that would allow them to more fully enact their activist identities.

CONCLUSION

This chapter shows how MoveOn members' values were translated into activist identities through value-oriented actions rooted in the organization. It ties Stryker's (1968, 1980) emphasis on role-based identities to Gecas's (2000) concept of "value identity" by showing how values that transcend particular roles nonetheless lead people into roles where they either develop or reinforce value-based identities. In the conclusion, I expand upon this point by describing the *value activation process* by which values lead to role-based action and, consequently, identity formation. However, before turning to this I first show in the next chapter how MoveOn's organizational identity is shaped by the organization, ideologically motivated news sources, and finally members' own activist experiences.

CHAPTER 6: THE CONTESTED MEANING OF MOVEON: ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY FRAMING BY MOVEON, MEDIA, AND MEMBERS

On September 10, 2007, MoveOn placed a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* entitled, “General Petraeus or General Betray Us?”. This ad accused General David Petraeus, then the commander of troops in Iraq, of “cooking the books for the White House” by skewing his Senate testimony to support the Bush Administration’s positive assessment of the Iraq war (MoveOn.org 2007a). Republican leaders immediately called upon Democrats to publicly condemn the ad and distance themselves from MoveOn, and Senator John McCain began traveling with a laminated copy of the ad so he could denounce it at every stop on his presidential campaign (Bash et al. 2007; TheWashingtonPost.com 2007). Within sixteen days of its publication, both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives voted to formally condemn MoveOn’s ad (Sanner 2007; Taylor 2007). MoveOn members responded by donating over \$500,000 to MoveOn on the day of the Senate resolution alone (Bai 2007b).

This controversy starkly illustrated how MoveOn represented different things to different groups of people depending on their positions on the political spectrum. In this chapter, I trace the relationship between MoveOn’s attempts to shape its organizational identity, “framing contests” (Ryan 1991) between ideologically driven news sources to define MoveOn’s identity, and interpretations of these competing identity frames by MoveOn members. The contest to frame MoveOn’s organizational identity—that is, what were defined as the distinguishing features of the organization (Albert and Whetten 1985)—took place in a “multiorganizational field” (Curtis and Zurcher 1973) that included organizations that were allied, opposed, and relatively neutral to MoveOn’s progressive political agenda (for more on organizational identity, see: Brown et al. 2006; Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000; Hatch and

Schultz 1997, 2002; Meyer 2004; Scott and Lane 2000; Whetten and Mackey 2002). A multi-organizational field includes all of the relationships between a focal social movement organization and other allied or opposed social movement organizations within an arena of political contestation. In the abortion debate, for example, a pro-choice organization would cooperate with other pro-choice groups in an “alliance system,” and compete with anti-abortion organizations in a “conflict system” (Klandermans 1992; Kriesi 1989; Luker 1984). These allied and antagonistic organizations influence movement organizations’ decisions about how to frame their issues and, as I show, their organizational identities (Cornfield and Fletcher 1998; McCammon et al. 2004).

I expand the concept of multiorganizational field to include news sources. Especially with the rise of political blogs and cable news networks like Fox News Channel, news sources are increasingly taking explicitly ideological positions in relation to political issues (Bernhardt, Krasa, and Polborn 2008; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010). In other words, these sources are functioning much like social movement organizations by providing interpretations of events that support their ideological positions. At the same time, leading news sources that are commonly considered “mainstream” play important legitimizing roles when they cover a social movement organization, even if this coverage is not entirely positive (Gitlin 1980; Ryan 1991). These sources, which I refer to as “discourse leaders,” help set the tone for how other “mainstream” news organizations (those still adhering to journalistic norms of objectivity and balance) should cover a topic. They also fundamentally shape public opinion about these topics (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Iyengar and Simon 1993; Jordan 1993; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987).

In this chapter, I contribute to scholarly understanding the contentious processes of identity

framing that occur in a multiorganizational field by linking identity framing by MoveOn, multiple news sources, and MoveOn members into a coherent (if not comprehensive) portrait of the organizational identity framing process. I address each interpretive arena in turn.

MOVEON'S ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY PROJECTIONS

MoveOn attempted to shape its public image by making claims about its identity in documents that were available to both organizational members and outsiders. In keeping with symbolic interactionist analyses that propose identity definitions emerge through interpretations projected by individuals and reacted to by others, I refer to MoveOn's claims as "organizational identity projections" (Blumer 1969; Cooley 1902; Goffman 1959). I qualitatively content analyzed fifty-three documents in which MoveOn explicitly framed its identity, including press releases, yearly reports, selected e-mails, and a short video about MoveOn's work in 2007. The claims it made were generally similar across all types of documents, although press releases included one distinct claim.

PROGRESSIVE

As in its attempts to define identity boundaries for community construction among members (see Chapter Four), MoveOn continually asserted that it was a progressive political organization. For example, its website included the statement, "With 5 million members across America,...we work together to realize the progressive promise of our country" (MoveOn.org 2011). Likewise, its 2008 post-election report stated, "MoveOn members made it clear from early 2007 that electing a progressive president was our top priority" (MoveOn.org 2008b). The "progressive" label was used in place of "liberal" and "Democratic" in MoveOn's identity projections; in fact, the latter two terms were notable for their absence as identifiers for MoveOn across all identity projections.

MoveOn shied away from calling itself “liberal” because conservatives were able to successfully reframe this term as indicative of weakness, immorality, and lack of patriotism (Frank 2005; Nunberg 2007). This tarnished ideological label was thus jettisoned in favor of one that had not yet been critically undermined by conservative counterframing. Moreover, by calling itself “progressive” rather than “Democratic,” MoveOn could position itself as an independent outsider organization, even as it supported Democratic candidates (see Chapter Eight). MoveOn was indeed legally independent of the Democratic Party, but since 1998 it had only supported Democrats in elections and almost exclusively backed Democrats’ legislative proposals. It hoped to define itself as independent in the eyes of members, however, because a significant proportion of its membership base believed the Democratic Party was too accommodating and weak on important issues like the Iraq War. Lastly, by identifying itself as “progressive,” MoveOn explicitly aligned itself with other organizations on the left end of the political spectrum, including progressive blogs. It thus embedded itself within a larger political movement that, as I discussed in Chapter Two, was inspired by American movements of the past 120 years.

INFLUENTIAL

Secondly, MoveOn asserted that it was influential. Statements of effectiveness appeared in many MoveOn documents, but were especially prominent in yearly reports. In its 2005 report, MoveOn said it played significant roles in Republican Senator Tom DeLay's resignation as House Majority Leader and President Bush’s failure to privatize Social Security. MoveOn also stated that its fundraising efforts for progressive congressional candidates “had a big impact,” and claimed, “in a number of these races candidates who were on shaky ground are now firmly in the lead” (MoveOn.org 2005a). It often supported such statements with statistics, charts, and

outside assessments to add legitimacy to these claims. For example, in its 2006 post-election report MoveOn cited an academic study of its voter outreach program, stating “A Yale University study showed that our phone bank was the most effective volunteer calling program ever studied” (MoveOn.org 2006). After the 2008 election, MoveOn proudly reported, “MoveOn members pulled out all the stops to elect Barack Obama, donating over \$88,000,000 and volunteering over 20,841,507 hours” (MoveOn.org 2008b). Such statements and statistics concretized MoveOn’s assertions of political influence. As I show later, though, they also gave conservative news sources fuel for claims that MoveOn was becoming too powerful.

CHAMPION FOR ORDINARY AMERICANS

Thirdly, MoveOn portrayed itself as a champion for ordinary Americans. On its website, MoveOn described itself as “a way for busy but concerned citizens to find their political voice in a system dominated by big money and big media” (MoveOn.org 2011). It frequently used the phrase “people-powered” to describe its approach to politics, implying that it was motivated by average people coming together for grassroots action (MoveOn.org 2006, 2008a, b). MoveOn also claimed, “the issues that concern and animate our members are the issues that move America” (MoveOn.org 2006). As with its assertions of influence, MoveOn used statistics, such as its membership (five million by 2010) and average donation (\$43.31 in 2004) figures, to support claims that it enjoyed broad-based support (MoveOn.org 2011). By calling attention to these statistics and claiming to represent “average people,” MoveOn hoped to counterbalance claims made by conservative politicians and commentators that it was a radical fringe organization. In fact, in its 2005 annual report, MoveOn made this strategy clear:

Right-wing operatives from Karl Rove on down have made MoveOn a target of their attacks.... The primary way we can fight back is by making our 3.3 million

members the face of the organization.... Our members look, act, and talk like real Americans because they *are* real Americans—and that’s the best way we can demonstrate that MoveOn’s a mainstream phenomenon (MoveOn.org 2005a).

ANTI-WAR BUT PRO-SOLDIER

Finally, in its press releases MoveOn went one step beyond claims that it represented average Americans by asserting it also represented soldiers. It did so by highlighting the participation of veterans and military families in anti-war protests. A press release from December 2005 describing the delivery of “Out of Iraq” petitions to congressional offices began as follows:

Opposition to President Bush’s failed Iraq policy surged today as MoveOn.org Political Action members, including veterans and military families, delivered petitions bearing 400,000 signatures to 248 district congressional offices, urging support for an exit strategy plan with a timetable to bring U.S. troops home from Iraq (MoveOn.org 2005b).

Another press release stated that “more than 20,000 veterans and family members, as well as citizens from both parties” had signed a petition demanding that Congress censure President Bush for “lying” about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (MoveOn.org 2004). By emphasizing the support of veterans and military families, MoveOn hoped to undercut the conservative strategy to portray it as unpatriotic and anti-soldier (Cillizza and Kane 2005). The fact that such statements only appeared in press releases suggests that MoveOn believed it needed to reassure outside audiences of its anti-war but pro-soldier position, but felt confident that members and allies already rejected the right-wing identity framing attempts.

When examined in full, MoveOn’s organizational identity projections reveal a pattern of

definition in response to real or perceived public opinion about the organization, much as described by Cooley (1902) in his theorization of the “looking-glass self.” MoveOn strategically framed its identity in anticipation of conservative counterframes. In this regard, MoveOn’s projected organizational identity was largely developed through a process of *reactive identity framing*. Such reactions against negative portrayals may well have been necessary to prevent the organization from being widely perceived as too radical for most Americans. However, by expending most of its energy on defending real or anticipated attacks on its identity, MoveOn failed to articulate an unambiguous organizational identity in which its mission and values were clearly defined. As I show below, this meant that its allies and members had to rely upon negative identity frames when constructing their own interpretations of MoveOn’s organizational identity.

CONTENTIOUS IDENTITY FRAMING IN THE NEWS

To examine how conservative, progressive, and “mainstream” news sources framed MoveOn differently, I selected seven sources representing these aspects of the ideological spectrum. To represent the conservative point of view, I chose Fox News Channel’s *The O’Reilly Factor*, *The New York Post*, and *The Washington Times*. These sources took openly conservative political positions in their news reports, had high viewership/readership, and frequently covered MoveOn (Guthrie 2008; MondoNewspapers.com 2009). I selected two blogs, *Daily Kos* and *Huffington Post*, to represent the progressive end of the spectrum. Both of these sources were leading blogs among netroots progressives and in general (Technorati.com 2007). They therefore were influential in shaping public perceptions of MoveOn. Finally, I chose *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to represent the “mainstream” media. Both newspapers were nationally recognized news sources that often set the agenda for news coverage across the country; in other

words, they were “discourse leaders.” I also selected these newspapers because I wanted to investigate whether they had a liberal bias, a common accusation leveled by conservatives (Gibson 2007; Hannity and Colmes 2007).

Using Altheide’s (1996) qualitative media analysis approach, I content analyzed a saturation sample of 522 reports about MoveOn that appeared in these sources during the 2007 calendar year. As suggested by Altheide, I coded all of these reports, but paid particular attention to the flurry of reports that appeared during “crisis” moments. These moments most notably included MoveOn’s (successful) campaign in March to prevent Democratic candidates from participating in a Fox-hosted presidential debate, and the publication of MoveOn’s “Petraeus or Betray Us?” ad in September. These moments included the clearest examples of the contention surrounding the definition of MoveOn’s identity. I dedicate more attention to conservative news coverage in my analysis because both progressive bloggers and MoveOn members relied upon these reports when developing their own interpretations of MoveOn’s organizational identity.

CONSERVATIVE CHALLENGES TO MOVEON’S IDENTITY CLAIMS

MoveOn’s projected organizational identity was repudiated in coverage by Fox News Channel’s *The O’Reilly Factor* (ORF), *The Washington Times* (WT), and *The New York Post* (NYP). These sources portrayed MoveOn as a far-left fringe organization, but reaffirmed MoveOn’s claims of influence when these claims could be used to frighten the conservative base.

Radical and Unpatriotic

All three sources frequently labeled MoveOn “far left,” “radical,” or “lunatic fringe.” To make MoveOn seem more radical, they also rhetorically connected the organization to well-known symbols of evil. For example, NYP suggested, “If Osama bin Laden ever gets tired of

waging global jihad, perhaps he should interview for a job with MoveOn.org” (The New York Post 2007a). Likewise, during MoveOn’s campaign against the Fox News debate in March 2007, Bill O’Reilly compared MoveOn’s tactics to those of Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels:

Within the Democratic Party, there are two elements, moderate Dems and radical left Dems. The radical movement is funded by George Soros and Peter Lewis, who pour millions of dollars into candidates and websites like MoveOn to do their bidding.... These people use propaganda techniques perfected by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of information. They lie, distort, [and] defame all the time (O’Reilly 2007a).

After MoveOn’s Petraeus ad was published in September 2007, WT argued that the ad was “beyond the pale, sinking swiftly to the level of Klansmen and Neo-Nazis” (The Washington Times 2007). By rhetorically connecting MoveOn to these individuals and groups, conservative news sources attempted to vilify the organization and frighten moderate citizens into believing it was too radical to consider joining (McCaffrey and Keys 2000; Vanderford 1989).

Conservative sources also tried to frame MoveOn as unpatriotic or even anti-American. A common strategy was linking MoveOn to George Soros, a billionaire who became a bogeyman for conservative commentators after he donated \$30 million to progressive organizations in 2004 (including \$2.5 million to MoveOn) to help them defeat George W. Bush (Bai 2007a). On his show in April 2007, Bill O’Reilly referred to Soros as “an extremist... who wants to impose a radical left agenda on America.” He then claimed that Soros was using MoveOn to buy off and intimidate politicians:

George Soros has given the radical left organization MoveOn many, many millions of dollars. This group actively supports liberal politicians like Howard

Dean and John Edwards.... If the liberal politician doesn't toe the Soros line, he or she will be denied funding and brutally attacked (O'Reilly 2007b).

Other conservative sources echoed this rhetoric and extended the argument to also condemn the Democratic Party. NYP used this guilt-by-association tactic one day after MoveOn's Petraeus ad appeared. It described MoveOn as "hard-left paranoids" and "social termites" that had "libeled a genuine American hero" with their "fascistic smear." It then linked MoveOn to the Democratic Party, saying Democrats "meant for groups like MoveOn to be their attack dog" (The New York Post 2007b). Two days later, WT reported that "antiwar Democrats in Congress are throwing tantrums because the war news is suddenly brighter," and asserted that MoveOn was, in fact, "the tail that wags the Democratic dog" (Pruden 2007). By implication, then, MoveOn and its Democratic allies were actually invested in *failure* in Iraq. This characterization portrayed MoveOn and the Democratic Party as unpatriotic radical organizations that were out of touch with most Americans.

MoveOn as Bully

In contrast to their rejections of MoveOn's other claims, conservative news sources often reaffirmed its claims of influence. They used these claims to frighten viewers and readers into believing MoveOn was imposing a "radical, left-wing" agenda upon the Democratic Party and the United States more generally. For example, during the Petraeus ad controversy, NYP called MoveOn "the \$28 million left-wing smash-mouth bully of politics," in reference to how much it spent on its 2006 get-out-the-vote efforts for Democratic congressional candidates (Campanile 2007). WT and ORF also relied upon this "bully" theme. During the Fox News debate controversy in March 2007, WT stated:

In the battle for control of the Democratic Party, the George Soros-MoveOn.org

crowd is used to getting its way.... Nevada Sen. Harry Reid knelt before MoveOn.org demands that another scheduled primary debate co-hosted by Fox be called off. And yesterday Barack Obama bowed to the mob.... This is about who runs the Democratic Party. Ever since they came close to nominating Howard Dean for president in 2004, left-wing Web activists have tried to punish any Democrat who dares to step out of line (Pierce 2007).

In September 2007, Bill O'Reilly used strikingly similar rhetoric to drive home the point that MoveOn was using strong-arm tactics:

A group of far left bloggers has succeeded in frightening most of the Democratic presidential candidates and moving the party significantly to the left, at least in the primary season. The lead intimidators are MoveOn, Media Matters, and the vicious Daily Kos. These people savagely attack those with whom they disagree.

And the politicians don't want to become smear targets (O'Reilly 2007c).

As these examples show, conservative news outlets credited MoveOn with significant political influence when such claims could be used to energize the conservative base. At the same time, they framed MoveOn as a radical fringe organization when such a characterization better suited their purposes. These negative portrayals fueled reactive identity framing among both progressive bloggers and MoveOn members.

PROGRESSIVE ATTEMPTS TO REHABILITATE MOVEON'S IDENTITY

In keeping with MoveOn's identity projections, both *Huffington Post* (HP) and *Daily Kos* (DK) regularly referred to the organization as "progressive" and portrayed it as influential. However, the two sources spent most of their time engaged in what I refer to as *identity rehabilitation*. Identity rehabilitation may involve both positive reframing of an organization's

identity and “countermaligning” (Benford and Hunt 2003), although in this particular case countermaligning was used exclusively. In countermaligning, a social movement organization attacks an opponent’s credibility in an attempt to delegitimize it and thereby undermine the claims the opponent made about the movement organization. In the case of MoveOn, though, this process was undertaken by progressive blogs, which served as proxies for MoveOn in the “framing contest” over its organizational identity (Ryan 1991).

The two blogs targeted Fox News almost exclusively, perhaps because it was the most widely watched cable news network and, therefore, a very powerful conservative voice (Guthrie 2008). They attacked its claims of being “fair and balanced” by pointing out cases in which Fox News commentators maligned MoveOn. During the controversy over MoveOn’s campaign to get Democratic presidential nominees to withdraw from the debate hosted by Fox, DK responded to a Fox News report in which MoveOn was labeled “radical fringe” by asking, “Would a truly unbiased outlet call MoveOn ‘radical fringe?’ Nope, those are right-wing GOP talking points” (Kos 2007a). A few days later, in response to claims that MoveOn and DK were guilty of “junior grade Stalinism” for pressuring Democrats to drop out of the Fox News debate, DK sarcastically remarked, “I guess I missed the part where MoveOn and I kidnapped the entire Fox News contributor corps in the middle of the night, lined them up against a wall, and shot them” (Kos 2007b). Using a tactic similar to Sykes and Matza’s (1957) “condemnation of condemners,” one HP blogger emphasized what he saw as the ludicrousness of Bill O’Reilly’s bias against Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards, saying, “Leave it to Fox’s Bill O’Reilly to take the mainstream current over the cliff—bellowing Tuesday that Edwards has ‘sold his soul to the far left... [and] MoveOn’s running him’” (J. Cohen 2007). Another HP blogger called Bill O’Reilly a hypocrite when he failed to denounce racist comments on a right-wing blog,

FreeRepublic.com, while simultaneously claiming Daily Kos and MoveOn were hateful sites (Young 2007).

Aside from showing these two sources' ideological alliances with MoveOn, these rehabilitative actions indicated that they viewed conservative identity framing efforts as genuine threats to MoveOn's credibility. Moreover, the fact that the blogs focused on attacking the sources of these negative frames instead of articulating positive identity frames shows that MoveOn did not provide a clear enough projected identity. Because the organization dedicated so much of its identity framing effort to countering conservative counterframes, it left allies like DK and HP with little choice but to also spend most of their time attempting to define MoveOn's identity by clarifying what it did *not* represent.

COVERAGE BY DISCOURSE LEADERS AS LEGITIMIZING FORCE

Although conservative commentators claimed *The Washington Post* (WP), and *The New York Times* (NYT) were part of the "liberal media" (Gibson 2007; Hannity and Colmes 2007), I found that neither explicitly advocated a political ideology. In general, NYT and WP seemed more concerned with adhering to the journalistic norm of objectivity. Of course, as Gans (2004:182) noted in his study of national news organizations, "objectivity is itself a value." To be clear, I am not asserting that NYT and WP were value-free news sources. Rather, I am claiming that their reporting on MoveOn was driven by adherence to the institutional ideology of American journalism, which asserts that news coverage should emphasize "balance" by including at least two perspectives on any issue (Schudson 2001). In the case of MoveOn, this meant that the two sources reported both critical and supportive statements about MoveOn. The fact that MoveOn received such balanced coverage by these well respected and widely read newspapers reinforced MoveOn's claims that it was a "mainstream" political organization, not

some fringe group.

In many cases, the sources' adherence to balance norms was apparent in the structure of a single article. For example, in an article about MoveOn's controversial Petraeus ad, WP quoted Republican presidential nominee John McCain calling the ad a "McCarthyite attack," then balanced this with a quote in which a spokesman for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton called the uproar over the ad "a political sideshow" (The Washington Post 2007). Other times, the two papers achieved balance by portraying MoveOn positively in some articles but criticizing the organization in others. While covering its anti-war campaign, NYT characterized MoveOn as organized and clean-cut, in contrast to the stereotypical image of Sixties-era war protesters:

The playbook for opposing a war has changed markedly since the street protest ethos of the anti-Vietnam movement. Tie-dyed shirts and flowers have been replaced by oxfords and Blackberrys.... And instead of a freewheeling circus managed from college campuses and coffee houses, the new antiwar movement is a multimillion-dollar operation run by media-savvy professionals (Crowley 2007).

Likewise, WP highlighted the organization's "mainstream" legitimacy by noting its connections to Democratic leaders:

MoveOn, after its rather guerrilla start, has increasingly become part of the Democratic establishment in Washington.... The group's conference calls often include aides to House and Senate Democratic leaders, and executive director Eli Pariser and [political director Tom] Mattzie have also had meetings with some of the party's 2008 presidential candidates... (Bacon 2007).

These positive portrayals were balanced with critical statements, some of which almost echoed conservative news reports. For example, an opinion piece in WP argued that Hillary Clinton did

not condemn MoveOn's ad because she "was afraid to alienate an important constituency, the 3.3 million members of MoveOn.org, who stand symbolically at the frontiers of New Hampshire [primaries] and Iowa [caucuses]" (R. Cohen 2007).

In general, NYT and WP avoided both celebratory and defamatory rhetoric in their attempts to achieve "objective" coverage of MoveOn. Although this "balance" was motivated by journalistic norms and was not designed to reinforce MoveOn's identity projections, it nonetheless legitimized MoveOn's claims that it was a "mainstream" political organization. In this regard, coverage by these "discourse leaders" also helped mitigate the effects of negative identity frames presented by conservative news sources.

MEMBERS' INTERPRETATIONS OF MOVEON'S IDENTITY

In interviews with forty-three members of various levels of participation, I asked members to describe MoveOn to me and explain how news coverage of MoveOn may have affected their perceptions of the organization. Because MoveOn relied upon vague identifiers like "progressive" and "average Americans" to articulate its organizational identity, members were able to impute meanings that reflected their own particular interpretations of these terms. In a process I call *biographical filtering*, members' cognitive frames of MoveOn—that is, how they interpreted its organizational identity—were shaped by their histories of activism and forms of participation in MoveOn. In addition to filtering their interpretations through their own experiences, members relied heavily upon negative coverage by conservative news sources, and engaged in *reactive identity framing* much like the progressive blogs.

BIOGRAPHICAL FILTERING OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

When I asked members to describe MoveOn, I found that most members articulated identity interpretations that generally coincided with MoveOn's identity projections, but some

refuted MoveOn's identity projections. These differing interpretations followed the "newcomer" and "veteran" distinction I described in Chapter Five to some extent, but it would be an oversimplification to say that these categories aligned exactly with the differences in identity framing.

Interpreting "Progressive" Identity

A newcomer in her fifties named Katrina who had participated in both online and offline MoveOn activism described MoveOn as "more liberal than Democrat," and characterized it as an "outside[r]" organization. Likewise, a sixty-six year-old veteran named Nancy, who frequently signed MoveOn's e-petitions and attended offline events, made a point of distinguishing MoveOn from party politics:

It's not linked with—even though it stands in line more and will endorse Democratic candidates—it's not linked to the Democratic Party. The issues are progressive... [and] it's not part of a political party.

On the other hand, a former MoveOn organizer and veteran activist in his thirties named Darren unsubscribed from MoveOn's e-mail list because, as he put it, "I didn't think they were as progressive as I once thought.... They started aligning with the Democratic Party too much, and didn't seem to have an independent voice." Another veteran named Truman stopped participating in MoveOn's offline actions because he felt "they've retreated toward the classic moderate left position." This sentiment was more common among veterans, although—as Nancy's comments show—not all veterans shared this view. As I showed in Chapter Five, many veterans joined MoveOn because they perceived it as more radical than the Democratic Party. Their histories of activism in left-wing movements and distrust of party politics made them suspicious of MoveOn's support of Democratic candidates and policy proposals. As a result,

they were more critical of its “progressive” identity claims than people who had less activist experience.

Evaluating MoveOn’s “Grassroots” Credibility

Members spoke about MoveOn’s claim to be a “people-powered” in terms of how “grassroots” the organization seemed to be. One newcomer named Maggie who solely participated in online activism described MoveOn as grassroots because it provided opportunities for interpersonal communication about political issues:

I see it as outside the political establishment, and I *do* see it as grassroots, yeah.

‘Cause, you know, people can e-mail. People are forwarding me MoveOn stuff all the time ‘cause they don’t know I’m already involved. It’s just such an easy way to pass information around.

Della, another newcomer and online activist, also emphasized the “networking” capability of MoveOn in her interpretation of its grassroots credibility:

With the Democrats, there is a pecking order and a hierarchy, and I don’t get that from MoveOn. MoveOn starts at the base, and—it’s a network. It’s a virtual network... [that] gets people together in cyberspace to do work that will affect our lives in this country.

In contrast, members who were more active in MoveOn’s offline actions and/or had histories of activism tended to question MoveOn’s “grassroots-ness.” In their eyes, online participation was not truly grassroots because it did not get people together face-to-face for coordinated action on the local level. A middle-aged veteran named Norah who was a regional coordinator at the time of our interview explicitly contrasted grassroots activism with online participation, saying:

I think of it as grassroots, not just the internet. Because I'm involved in a local council and we're doing all these events, and everywhere I go I meet people who say, 'Oh, you're in MoveOn, that's so cool!' I think it's very much grassroots and a place for progressives... to come together and take action. I used to see it more as like an internet group, and I think we've really moved away from that, out into the streets.

Similarly, a veteran named Kurtis who led another council compared MoveOn's internet-based activism with his experiences in social movements during the Seventies and Eighties. These prior activist experiences shaped his understanding of what could justifiably be called grassroots:

"Grassroots" for me used to be, before the internet existed, groups of people just getting together locally and working together.... People getting out there and doing the work. That's *true* grassroots, I think. This concept of having three million people on a list who get e-mails and respond that way, it's not *really*—certainly by the traditional definition of "grassroots," there's nothing grassroots about that.

Clearly, members' histories of participation in MoveOn and other activist organizations influenced their interpretations of MoveOn's organizational identity. These prior experiences shaped their cognitive frames regarding the interpretation of the meanings of "progressive" and "grassroots." For those who had little if any prior experience during which they had developed these cognitive frames, MoveOn's proclamations of organizational identity went largely unchallenged. Furthermore, because of the ambiguity of meaning inherent to broad terms like "progressive," they were able to read into these terms whatever meaning made the most sense in the context of their limited experience with activism.

REACTIVE IDENTITY FRAMING AND NEGATIVE NEWS COVERAGE

Regardless of whether they were newcomers or veterans, members paid a great deal of attention to news coverage of MoveOn. In my interviews, I found that members referred to negative coverage by conservative news sources far more frequently than coverage by other sources. Like the progressive blogs, members reacted against this coverage as a way of articulating their interpretations of MoveOn's organizational identity.

Some members claimed that they were not influenced by negative coverage of MoveOn. However, their responses showed that, though perhaps unaware, they reacted against portrayals of MoveOn as a radical fringe organization. Adam, an online activist in his thirties, touched upon this when I asked him what he had heard about MoveOn in the media:

You know, I can't really say I've seen it a lot in the media. But at the same time, when I have it's been more from, more conservative kind of bashing it. Or calling it "radical," and me kinda laughing at the characterization of it as such.... I just can't even take [the negative coverage] serious... especially from Fox.

This sentiment was also reflected in the response of Justin, a thirty-two year-old online activist:

Well, the perception coming through that I gather coming from the mainstream media is that MoveOn is a *very* liberal, *super* left organization funded by George Soros.... But I think that *my* perception of MoveOn through things I read in the mainstream is not affected at *all*. I expect them to demonize it, you know? As they're gonna try to demonize *any* left-wing organization as tinfoil-hat-wearing, lunatic type stuff.

Members expressed suspicion of information reported by the "mainstream" media, and often equated "mainstream" with conservative news outlets like Fox News. Though they doubted

the objectivity of such coverage, members nonetheless revealed that this news coverage helped them view MoveOn as influential. Patricia, an online activist in her fifties, stated:

I think for people who agree with MoveOn's values and principles and actions like myself, what I've seen in *The New York Times* or in the local paper validates what you do and is kind of affirming. You feel like, 'Oh, someone notices!'... It makes it feel like what I'm doing is worthwhile.

Beth, a twenty-two year-old local council leader, said press coverage "adds legitimacy to their mission... and shows that you're probably doing something right." This belief was especially fueled by negative coverage, which members took as proof of the organization's strength. James, a sixty-three year-old active council member, expressed this sentiment particularly well:

I think the acid test of that [MoveOn's effectiveness] is we have right-wing pundits like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly come out and just *smash* MoveOn and other groups so intentionally and constantly. You know they're getting some attention in the White House and elsewhere. They are *feared* because they have the ear of the people.

As these statements illustrate, members relied upon media coverage, and especially negative press, as a key indicator that MoveOn was an influential political organization. Through reactive identity framing, conservative attempts to undermine MoveOn's credibility were translated into statements that actually supported MoveOn's claims of influence. Much like the doomsday cult followers studied by Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter (1964), members found confirming evidence of MoveOn's identity projections even in seemingly contradictory news accounts of the organization.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have traced the connections between organizational identity framing attempts by MoveOn, ideologically motivated news sources, and members are connected. As in symbolic interactionist accounts of identity formation, this complex process involves projection of a desired identity and reactions to outsiders' (in this case, news sources') interpretations of this identity. Given the increasingly partisan nature of news coverage, news sources compete along ideological lines to define this organizational identity. Members are exposed to these competing identity frames, and filter the claims through their own cognitive frames to come to their own understandings of MoveOn's organizational identity. In the next chapter, I continue to focus on interpretive meaning making, but turn my attention to MoveOn's attempts to stage and script successful media events.

CHAPTER 7: LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTIVISM! THE STAGING AND SCRIPTING OF MOVEON'S OFFLINE EVENTS

Nearly every action undertaken by MoveOn was directed toward spreading its messages about issues. Most of this effort centered on injecting its issue frames into the public discourse at opportune moments early in the “issue attention cycle” (Downs 1972; Henry and Gordon 2001; Joppke 1991), before news commentators and political spokespeople had the chance to spin messages in their favor. With the dominance of cable news networks and the ascendancy of political blogs, MoveOn faced a perpetual “news cyclone” (Klinenberg 2005) that seemed to have accelerated from a twenty-four hour news cycle to a “twenty-four minute news cycle” (Poniewozik 2008; see also Boczkowski and de Santos 2007; Karlsson and Strömbäck 2010; Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; Leskovec, Backstrom, and Kleinberg 2009; Rosenberg and Feldman 2009). As one MoveOn field organizer put it in an interview, “news isn’t news as long as it used to be.” To accommodate the speed of the news cycle, MoveOn provided pre-packaged sets of materials for each “rapid response” event it asked members to organize. It also offered training to regional coordinators and council core members in how to stage these events and interact with the media such that the message intended for each event would be successfully conveyed to the public and to politicians.

I analyze this process from a dramaturgical perspective. As Goffman (1959) asserted, social interactions can be viewed as performances in which actors attempt to manage others’ impressions through the use of language, gestures, props, and other elements that set the stage for their performances. Although Goffman focused on microsocial interactions, others have adapted the dramaturgical approach to analyze how organizations, including social movement organizations, manage the impressions of their members and audiences. Snow (1979) showed

how the Nichiren Shoshu movement provided cues to members regarding how to portray themselves and act in public to convey the impression that the movement was “mainstream.” Kubal (1998) revealed how activists framed political claims differently in “back stage” and “front stage” regions of the movement. Benford and Hunt (1992) outlined four dramatic techniques used by movements to guide members’ and onlookers’ interpretations of the movement’s goals, targets, and power. Three of these dramatic techniques form the basis of my analysis of how MoveOn scripted and staged members’ performances in offline events.

I also draw attention to how MoveOn implicitly and explicitly directed members’ emotional experiences and expressions during these events. MoveOn asked event hosts and participants to perform “emotional labor” (Hochschild 1983) for the organization by displaying or suppressing certain emotions during events to convey the “appropriate” impression to the media and other audiences. These “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1983) were spelled out in e-mails, training manuals, and event planning materials. In the words of Zurcher (1982, 1985), MoveOn “scripted,” “staged,” and “phased” members’ emotions. The organization told members what emotions were appropriate for an event, guided the construction of “stages” that conveyed the organization’s message, and set expectations for which emotions should be felt and/or expressed before, during, and after events.

I illustrate these dramaturgical processes by following the trajectory of rapid response events from the highest levels of MoveOn’s strategic decision-making, through the intermediate back stage regions where events were rehearsed, and finally to the local level, where they were enacted for audiences on the front stage. After explaining the strategic importance of these events, I give a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the training involved in staging successful media events. Then I turn to an in-depth examination of how MoveOn directed the physical and

emotional performances of members through both figurative and literal scripts. To do so, I focus on four events: a candlelight vigil, a calling party, a congressional office visit, and an interactive public quiz event. These events were representative of MoveOn's offline "repertoire of contention" (Tilly 1979), the set of tactics it most commonly used to dramatize its issue claims.

DIRECTING THE ACTION: MOVEON'S STRATEGIC FOCUS ON MEDIA

Using its e-mail list, MoveOn could simultaneously reach out to millions of people in an attempt to mobilize them for rapid response events, local-level actions whose primary purpose was to create what one field organizer called "a progressive echo chamber" by getting coverage in hundreds of media markets across the country on the same day. A member of MoveOn's national staff explained the strategy this way:

You can't in this country push a politician to raise the profile of an issue unless it comes up in the media all over the place. And we can't afford, as a movement, to buy ads for every single issue we want to push. So earning media coverage by getting people out on the street and showing that there's a base of support for an issue is just a critical tactic.... Otherwise you won't be taken seriously when you go to Congress, you won't be taken seriously in the op-ed pages of the paper.

In short, as one of the leading progressive organizations in the country, MoveOn understood the importance of attempting to shape public discourse and, consequently, politicians' positions on issues.

To accomplish this, MoveOn relied upon a combination of top-down strategizing and bottom-up feedback to choose issues and tactics. Every month, MoveOn sent a survey to approximately 30,000 members asking them to vote on what issues the organization should work on in the next couple of months. This feedback, combined with unsolicited feedback from

members sending e-mails to MoveOn, helped organizational leaders narrow their focus of possible targets. Member feedback was then synthesized with the leadership's overall strategic vision and sense of what issues were most important at the moment, which was often based on the top headlines in leading newspapers. Another of MoveOn's paid staffers described the process:

So people [members] say, "Let's do something about gas prices." Then we think, "What's the most strategic way for members to weigh in on gas prices?" And we tend to kind of brainstorm. Like, "Okay, what are a bunch of tactics that we could use? We could be handing out flyers at local gas stations, or we could do protests at local energy companies," or whatever. So we look at those and rank them and rate them, and come up with one that seems like it's gonna work best for the members and, you know, accomplish the objectives that people want us to accomplish.

A paid field organizer also noted that an important consideration was, "What's going to be the big media hook that's going to get the attention we need, but also get our point across? Is it a candlelight vigil, a petition delivery, a town hall meeting?" Once MoveOn's staff selected the tactics they believed would best serve the message, they relayed this information to field organizers, who oversaw the network of approximately two hundred MoveOn councils across the country. The field organizers informed regional coordinators of the plan, and the regional coordinators contacted their local councils to let them know what events they would soon need to organize. Council leaders then contacted local MoveOn members to recruit event hosts and participants, and encouraged local news outlets to cover the event.

These councils were developed in part wherever MoveOn members were geographically concentrated enough to warrant a local organizing body. However, as interviews and work as a regional coordinator confirmed, they were also strategically developed to represent as many major and mid-level media markets as possible. This served the larger purpose of creating the “progressive echo chamber” effect by increasing the chances that MoveOn would be able to coordinate events in the majority of media markets in the United States. Given that MoveOn planned to have members across the country organize simultaneous events with the same message, it was critical to consider the scalability and replicability of an event. To ensure that events “echoed” one another, MoveOn provided pre-packaged signs, talking points, and tips on how, when, and where to set up events. As a MoveOn field organizer explained:

It comes back to a basic media principle of consistency, of having your talking points and hammering them home.... [I]f you take three or four of the biggest [problems with a piece of legislation] and synthesize them into one event with the same message all across the country, first it’s local news, then it’s regional news, and then it’s national news. You’re firing on all cylinders there.

This combination of bottom-up feedback and top-down strategizing allowed MoveOn to function much like a representative democracy: members guided its selection of issues, but leaders had decisive control over organizational strategy and tactical implementation of events related to these issues.

Ultimately, all of this strategizing was directed toward the successful transmission of MoveOn’s messages. The events planned by MoveOn’s leaders and organized by its members were rhetorical performances meant to convey specific impressions of the organization and its issues to the public via the news media. Like most other social movement organizations,

MoveOn wanted to frame the debate over issues with which it was concerned, and it needed the news media to transmit its issue frames (Benford and Hunt 2003; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Gitlin 1980; Ryan 1991; Snow et al. 1986). However, without any permanent local offices, paid local organizers, or other opportunities to place organizational representatives into controlling positions at the local level, MoveOn relied heavily upon pre-packaged activism and top-down dramaturgical control to orchestrate successful media events.

REHEARSING OUR ROLES BACK STAGE: MEDIA TRAINING

MoveOn expended a great deal of time and resources on training its most active members in how to organize events that would attract media attention and convey its messages. During my time as an active member of my local council and then, later, as a regional coordinator, I participated in three group trainings in how to run what MoveOn called “media events,” and ran two trainings for councils I oversaw. These trainings were opportunities to rehearse our scenes and get to know our lines back stage, before we were in front of the media and the public. One training was particularly illustrative of MoveOn’s concern with directing members’ performances at media events.

On a cold but sunny Saturday in February of 2007, I attended a media training that was led by one of MoveOn’s paid field organizers. A group of about fifteen council members, including me, crowded into a conference room in a temporary field office for four of MoveOn’s field organizers. As we entered, Jeremy, the field organizer, welcomed us and handed each of us a seventeen-page document, entitled *Coordinating Council Media Training Manual*, that included an overview of why media was important to MoveOn, what principles and logistical considerations we should keep in mind when planning events, and samples of media materials that we would use to role play a media event. We sat around a large dark wooden conference

table in a crescent shape, facing the front of the room where Jeremy stood beside a white board. He began by discussing why media was important to MoveOn's strategy. These goals included putting public pressure on decision makers, educating the public about issues in an efficient way, legitimizing an issue as a bona fide point of public concern, and psyching up local MoveOn members by getting their names in the paper. Ultimately, Jeremy said, the strategy boiled down to one simple fact: "The media sets the political debate in America. It's the major filter through which the agenda is set. What is discussed in the media is what our leaders need to respond to."

Jeremy then shifted to a discussion of media principles that council members should keep in mind when planning events. "MoveOn provides us with a pre-packaged message," he said. "We just need to make sure we get that message across effectively." To "sell the story," as he put it, we needed to make it compelling, and this required inclusion of a hero, villain, and victim in every story. This set up a dramatic conflict, which Jeremy pointed out is "the bread and butter of the media." He used the hypothetical example of a health care event in which Republicans and big pharmaceutical companies would be the villains, Democrats who stood up for universal health care would be the heroes, and middle-class Americans would be the victims. Secondly, Jeremy cautioned us to stick to the talking points provided by MoveOn and make our points succinctly, saying, "It doesn't do us any good if we respond to a reporter's question with a three-paragraph diatribe, because they're only going to print or film that seven-second sound bite. So keep it brief." His statement is supported by research that shows the average length of sound bites has consistently decreased from forty-three seconds in 1968 to less than eight seconds in 2004 (Bucy and Grabe 2007; Hallin 1992; Lichter 2001). Third, he encouraged us to keep a consistent message throughout the event and repeat it over and over. Again using a sales analogy, Jeremy noted that "advertisers know that people have to hear something *nine times*

before it sinks in,” and told us, “Even if it starts to get really boring for you, it’s important that you keep repeating the same message at the event and to the media so we can get our point across.”

Next, we spent about thirty minutes discussing and roleplaying what the training manual referred to as “pivoting.” Pivoting involved *responding* to reporter’s questions rather than answering them outright. Jeremy painted the activist-reporter relationship as an antagonistic encounter in which the reporter would try to “steer the conversation” in ways that would prevent the activist from effectively conveying his or her message. To combat this, Jeremy taught us to use “pivoting phrases,” such as, “The truth is...” and “What’s important is that...” to return to MoveOn’s prepared talking points. He enthusiastically walked us through how to use the pivoting phrases. “So a reporter says, ‘Why would you support this? It’s obviously a bad policy,’” he explained. “You start out with, ‘The truth is’ and your talking point; that’s the sound bite.” Throughout his explanation, Jeremy repeatedly pointed out that reporters are typically in a position of power by virtue of being the questioner, but asserted that pivoting would “turn that on its head” and give activists the power. He cautioned, though, that this reversal of the power dynamic “does not mean that we should be negative or defensive in our response.” Adding an important layer of emotion management to his training, Jeremy concluded, “Everything has to be upbeat and rosy, even when they [reporters] are trying to beat us into the ground, because when we’re upbeat and rosy, we’re staying on message.”

The final twenty minutes of this training session were spent on a roleplay for an event. This part of the training was particularly enlightening in terms of the dramaturgical elements of MoveOn’s events, because it was essentially a dress rehearsal for the types of events we would be staging in the near future. Jeremy asked three women to play the parts of event speaker,

attendee, and reporter, while he played the role of event organizer. The women playing the reporter and attendee briefly stepped out of the room and then returned to simulate arrival at the event. Jeremy, in character, told the “speaker” where to stand so that the “reporter” would be able to get a good camera angle that incorporated the “audience.” “We’re gonna have people with signs, holding them up. It’s gonna kinda be a half-moon feel,” he said, still in character. “That way the camera guy can get a picture of the large crowd, but you can still see them and speak.” Breaking character, Jeremy then expounded on the philosophy of staging such events. His explanation brought into sharp focus the thoroughly dramaturgical nature of MoveOn’s events:

The key here is that these are planned events. There’s no reason they *shouldn’t* be choreographed. But more specifically, when you’re choreographing something, the ones you have to worry about are the ones that aren’t part of the ensemble, right? So we’ve got ten, twenty, thirty, forty members showing up to any one event. Well, the best thing we can do is make sure that we have someone greeting them and sharing with them just how they can be most useful.... We can put their minds at ease by first sharing with them the agenda.... Second thing we can do is give ‘em a task. Give ‘em a sign if they don’t have one. Or give ‘em a good place to stand. Say, “You could be perfect if you stood over there, because we need to make sure the crowd stays together. It makes for a better picture, better visual.”... And it doesn’t hurt to let ‘em know, “You’re only gonna have seven seconds for your sound bite; make it a good one.”... We just want them to know when they’re talking to the press, we’re there to expound upon *this* message.

With that, Jeremy wrapped up the training and thanked us all for coming. As we grabbed our coats and prepared to leave, we commented to one another and to Jeremy about the effectiveness of the training. As an active council member, in that moment I was truly pleased to have gained the confidence and tools to interact with reporters. Only later did I recognize how deeply MoveOn was exerting dramaturgical control over our actions and emotions through this media training.

IT'S SHOWTIME: THE SCRIPTING AND STAGING OF MOVEON'S EVENTS

This dramaturgical control extended to the materials MoveOn provided to event hosts and participants. As Benford and Hunt (1992) argued, social movement events are ultimately dramas performed for a public audience, much like staged theatrical performances. They elaborated upon four “dramatic techniques” used by movements to construct events, three of which are pertinent to my analysis.

The first technique is “scripting,” in which a set of directions is developed that “define the scene, identify actors, and outline expected behavior” (Benford and Hunt 1992:38). This includes identifying antagonists, victims, protagonists, a supporting cast, and audiences. The movement also supplies members with “vocabularies of motive” (Mills 1940) that lay out rationales and justifications for why the requested action is important. These scripts are built upon diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames that dramatize the problem, specify appropriate ameliorative actions, and emphasize the urgency of getting involved (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992).

Secondly, movements guide the “staging” of performances, including both the material necessities of the event as well as its symbolic qualities. Thus, movements tell members what resources to make available to participants, and provide guidance (if not the materials

themselves) regarding how best to convey the movement's message through symbolic elements like signs, images, choice of setting, location of audience, and other such considerations.

Finally, movements guide participants' performances to ensure the intended message is effectively communicated. They demand "dramaturgical loyalty" from members, calling for adherence to the script to present a convincing, sincere performance to the audience. They also ask members to exercise "dramaturgical discipline" by behaving in ways that maintain the movement's desired emotional tone throughout the performance.

SCRIPTING

MoveOn provided scripts to members both figuratively and literally. For each event, MoveOn guided members' perceptions, actions, and emotional experiences through e-mails, event materials, and conference calls. In addition, participants and hosts were able to download actual scripts for speaking to reporters, onlookers, other participants, and, in the case of calling parties, voters.

In August of 2005, MoveOn asked members to host or attend candlelight vigils in support of Cindy Sheehan's vigil in Crawford, Texas. Sheehan was the mother of a soldier who had been killed in Iraq, and she was camping on the roadside directly across from George W. Bush's ranch during the president's vacation to dramatize her point that Bush lied to the American people about the imminent threat posed by Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction. In its first e-mail about the planned vigils, MoveOn identified the villain, victims, and heroes in the performance, and set an emotional tone that called for both outrage and sorrow:

Cindy Sheehan, mother of Army Specialist Casey Sheehan who was killed in Iraq, continues her vigil outside President Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas. She was joined Thursday by several more moms, each of whom lost a child in Iraq, and

other military families. The closest she got to the president was when his motorcade of giant black SUVs raced past her on the way to a \$2 million Republican fundraiser.

This message also prescribed appropriate behavior and emotional displays at the event, saying, “These vigils aren’t rallies or places to give speeches. They are moments to solemnly come together and mark the sacrifice of Cindy and other families.”

After I signed up online to co-host my local vigil, I received an e-mail that included a link to a “host packet” of prepared event materials. This host packet included a guide to setting up the vigil, a media advisory template, and a set of talking points. These materials laid out the entire logistical and emotional script for the dramatic performance. Reflecting the earlier invitational e-mail, the host guide specified, “part of your role as a coordinator is to help ensure that the vigil remains quiet, dignified, respectful, and safe.” It then called upon the host to take unspecified ameliorative actions “in the unlikely event of a conflict” in order to “make sure people know that this is not a place for speeches or policy discussions.” Clearly, MoveOn desired a limited range of actions and emotional expressions that would convey an image of solemn reflection. Literal scripts for contacting and speaking to reporters before and during the event reinforced this figurative scripting. Under the cut-and-paste headline, “Mothers in [YOUR TOWN] to President Bush: Meet with Mother Whose Son was Killed in Iraq,” the media advisory template spelled out the reasons for the vigil. Included in this advisory was a pre-packaged quote to be attributed to whomever the host wished to name:

“Many of us have children in Iraq and have the same questions as Cindy,” said

[XXXX], [CITY] MoveOn member. “We want to know why our sons and

daughters are still in Iraq? Why have so many died? When will they come home?” concluded [XXX].

This scripted emotional expression was further reinforced by the talking points provided by MoveOn, which included statements like, “All we are asking is that the president sacrifice one hour out of his five-week vacation to meet with a mother who lost her son in Iraq.” These materials were the concrete manifestations of the scripting of action and emotional displays that was being undertaken through all of MoveOn’s communications with event hosts and participants.

Actions and emotions were equally scripted for events that were not held in public locations or focused on media attention. In November of 2007, for example, I hosted a “calling party” as part of MoveOn’s “Call Kentucky for Change” get-out-the-vote program. This event had two goals: first, it was a test of the get-out-the-vote tools that MoveOn planned to use for the 2008 election; secondly, it was an opportunity to help a Democrat get elected as governor in Kentucky. As the host of the event, I was asked to join a national conference call three days before the party. On the call, two MoveOn staffers walked hosts through final preparations for the event. Both staffers spent a significant portion of the call telling party hosts how to manage participants’ expectations and emotions. They especially focused on the management of participants’ fears and frustrations, and prepared hosts to motivate callers in the face of negative interactions with voters:

There are going to be people who are rude, or irritated, or not particularly nice.

And if I get one of those things, what I do is as soon as I get off the phone with them, I dial the next number. And that’s really something that you want to communicate to your guests. You know, “You probably won’t get anyone who’s

rude or irritated, but if you do the best thing you can do is get on that next call and reach a voter who's supportive.”

This scripting of emotions and actions also appeared on the host materials provided by MoveOn. These materials included a script for what to say to guests before they started calling, a sheet with background information about the two candidates in the Kentucky governor's race, a script for what to say to voters, tips for calling and reporting call results to MoveOn, and an event guide that laid out what I should do as host before, during, and after the event. To “get folks excited” about calling voters, the host guide suggested I provide a bell for callers to ring each time they finished calling through a list of voters. Likewise, the guide suggested that at the end of the party I “ask about folks’ favorite call and encourage them to share fun/interesting calls with the group” in order to “make sure everyone feels good about their time” spent at the party. Perhaps the most glaring example of scripted emotional expression appeared on the “Tips for Calling” sheet MoveOn provided for each participant. In a section regarding how to leave messages for voters, the tips sheet directed callers to “speak slowly and clearly, and *smile*” [emphasis added]. Like Hochschild's (1983) bill collectors, MoveOn's volunteers were asked to perform emotional labor through their vocal expressions in order to shape the impressions and (hopefully) behavior of the strangers to whom these messages were directed.

STAGING

MoveOn was also deeply involved in the staging of these events. Because the events were supposed to convey specific and consistent messages simultaneously across the country, MoveOn exerted significant control over the symbolic elements of each event. Basic considerations for staging included selecting a location and time for the performance, gathering props, organizing the cast, and inviting the audience (i.e., the media). Along with public spaces

like parks or the steps of government buildings, MoveOn frequently planned events that were located at local congressional offices. These “stages” were selected because they offered a visually symbolic interaction between congressional representatives (or their staff members) and MoveOn members that would entice news reporters. In fact, MoveOn frequently told hosts where to hold events, and advised, “If you have a choice between places, opt for the one that is most easily accessible to media.” Moreover, MoveOn often recommended that events be held in the middle of the day during the workweek. This made it difficult for many members to participate because they were working, but it made the events more convenient for reporters, who would have time to write stories or edit footage before their evening deadlines.

In December of 2007, I helped plan a petition delivery event that MoveOn organized in response to statements President Bush made about the possibility that the United States would need to intervene militarily to stop Iran from enriching uranium. For this event, MoveOn members delivered petitions signed by representatives’ constituents to their local congressional offices, and asked these representatives to co-sponsor legislation opposing Bush’s attempts to justify war with Iran. As with other events, MoveOn provided hosts with an assortment of guides, scripts, talking points, and media advisories. The host guide clarified that “the primary point of this event is to show your Representatives that local constituents are paying attention to their stance on Iran,” but it also noted, “your delivery will reach thousands more people if you are able to get media coverage.” To assist hosts in this effort, MoveOn prioritized media contacts (from the Associated Press down to local radio stations) and told them to call local news outlets during reporters’ morning assignment meetings to maximize the potential for coverage. In the media advisory template, MoveOn emphasized “excellent visuals,” including “voters, stacks of

petitions, [and] signs.” These “visuals” were props for the symbolic performance of democratic expression for the benefit of the press and the targeted representatives.

Some props, like the signs, were professionally prepared and immediately downloadable for quick and easy use. The petition delivery signs included a red octagon with a white hand in front and bold black lettering underneath that said “Stop Bush’s Iran War.” MoveOn clarified their symbolic value and outlined appropriate use in the host guide:

These signs will be useful if you do pre- and/or post-delivery sign-waving outside the congressional office. You can hold the signs and wave to cars as they go by.

You can also bring them into the office with you to reinforce your message during the meeting with congressional staff. This also helps spice up the photos of your meeting!

Props also included event participants, which the media advisory tellingly included in its list of “excellent visuals.” For the Iran petition delivery, MoveOn emphasized the strategic use of veterans and military family members. If participants indicated they were veterans or military family members when they signed up online for the event, MoveOn gave this information to hosts and encouraged them to introduce these people to congressional office staff and reporters. These veterans and military families, as well as other participants, served double duty as cast members and props in the dramatic performance.

Another event that was staged with great attention to the media was the Bush-McCain Challenge. This event was based on the old Pepsi-Coke Challenge, in which passersby were asked to taste samples of the two sodas to see if they could tell which one was Pepsi. For the Bush-McCain Challenge, the point was to ask people if they could tell whether George W. Bush or John McCain made a given statement. The Challenge was originally planned for May 22,

2008, but was rescheduled for May 28, 2008, in light of an impending announcement by Barack Obama that would monopolize the media spotlight during the originally scheduled time. One of MoveOn's staff members related this information to the regional coordinators via an internal e-mail:

Barack Obama announced today that he plans to declare that he's reached the necessary threshold of delegates in the Presidential race on May 20th.... [T]his makes it very likely that there'll be a media frenzy around him and Hillary Clinton on May 21st and 22nd.... [W]e won't be able to effectively get our message out if the media is obsessing over the Democratic horse-race. So we're changing the date to the next week to make sure we can be heard (5/9/08 e-mail).

MoveOn clearly prioritized media accessibility in the timing of the event, saying, "The best time to hold this event is at noon, because we'll be inviting the media to cover our Bush-McCain Challenge." As with the Iran petition delivery, this time was inconvenient for many members, but was selected anyway because of its convenience for reporters.

The Bush-McCain Challenge was the most elaborately staged MoveOn event of which I was a part during my four years of participant observation. Because the state in which I lived in 2008 was predicted to be a "swing state" in the presidential election, MoveOn spent over \$200 having signs and other materials printed at the local Kinko's. It supplied laminated "game cards" with photos of Bush and McCain, quiz sheets with questions for passersby, flyers with information about John McCain's position on issues, and several bright red two-foot-by-three-foot signs saying "Take the Bush-McCain Challenge: Can You Tell the Difference?" The host guide outlined how all of these props should be used, and specified, "The big posters should be taped to the multiple sides of the table to look good for cameras." Under the heading "What the

Table Should Feel Like,” the host guide directed the visual and emotional tone of the event, with an eye toward how it would look in the news:

The goal is to have the table feel like a fun, inviting carnival game—not like a political table with literature. This means your table should be energetic. Great props include balloons, candy, and high-energy volunteers behind the table. Any add-ons you can think of that add “fun” can be great. (Imagine a clown handing out flyers). Not good are things that will look fringe or dark on the news (like a grim reaper costume holding some sign about Bush). People nearby handing out flyers about the table will also add to the excitement.

The fact that MoveOn made a point of deterring members from doing anything that would appear “fringe” (i.e., make MoveOn look like an extremist organization full of crazy people) clearly illustrated how these events were carefully staged symbolic performances designed to convey particular impressions of the organization as well as inject its issue frame into public discourse.

PERFORMING

In its event materials and prep calls, MoveOn also made it clear that it expected dramaturgical loyalty and discipline. Dramaturgical loyalty requires that participants “be taken in by their performance enough to appear sincere but not so much as to become overinvolved,” while dramaturgical loyalty “involves sustaining self-control so as to behave in ways that maintain the movement’s affective line” (Benford and Hunt 1992:45-46). In other words, participants were expected to display behaviors and emotions that reinforced the event’s message and did not jeopardize MoveOn’s public image. As agents of control during the event, hosts were tasked with maintaining the emotional tone of events and keeping participants on message.

MoveOn set out expectations for members' emotional performances in the materials I received as a co-host of the Iran petition delivery. It urged participants, "Be respectful. Losing your temper or getting rowdy will not help our campaign, reflect well on your group, or stop Bush from attacking Iran." In addition, the guide told people to "speak from the heart" while telling staffers why they opposed war with Iran, but, somewhat contradictorily, provided three bullet-pointed suggestions for what to say, including statements like, "We're already fighting one disastrous war in Iraq, and our military is stretched to the breaking point."

As a symbolic gesture of kindness, my co-host Beth, who was the council coordinator for my local MoveOn council at that time, baked a cake for the congressional staff members. It was not just any cake, though; she had carved the cake in the shape of Iran, frosted it in green, and piped the words "Don't Invade Iran" in black lettering on top. Clearly, she was dedicated to keeping the event on message. Beth and I arrived about twenty minutes before the rest of the participants were supposed to show up, introduced ourselves to the congressional staff, and told them to expect ten to fifteen people. Indeed, a total of eleven people arrived. We chatted for a couple of minutes outside the office, introducing ourselves to one another and waiting for reporters to show up. No news crews appeared, though, so shortly after 2:00pm on a cold December day, we all shuffled into the reception area at the congressional representative's office and stood in a loose semi-circle facing the office manager, who came out to greet the participants. Beth set the tone for the meeting by presenting the staff with her Iran-shaped cake, and then spoke about our reasons for being there. In a serious tone, she interwove her personal story about her brother's service in Iraq and Afghanistan with prepared talking points about how Bush was not authorized by Congress to start a war with Iran. She then asked other participants if they would like to share their reasons for coming to the petition delivery.

One woman who appeared to be in her early sixties spoke first. She recounted a long history of peace activism beginning with opposition to the Vietnam War, and said she was disgusted with how eager President Bush seemed to be to start a war with Iran. Her tone was one of subdued outrage; she restrained herself from expressing outright anger, thereby maintaining the appropriate emotional tone set by Beth and laid out in the event materials. The next speaker, however, did not adhere to this emotional script. He was dressed in blue jeans, and wore a black leather jacket with an American flag patch sewn onto the left sleeve and a patch on the right sleeve designating the military division in which he served during the Vietnam War. As a veteran, he seemingly was an ideal spokesperson for our message. Although this life experience gave him perspective on the realities of war, his self-presentation and strident emotional tone made him appear threatening to the representative's staff. He initially stayed on message, saying, "I know what it's like to go to war, and it ain't no fun, let me tell you. I don't wanna see a bunch of kids have to go through what I went through." His tone turned increasingly angry, though, and his message shifted to impeachment:

Nothing's gonna change as long as Bush is in office. I don't know why we're asking [name of representative omitted] to support some resolution against war with Iran when really he should be working on impeachment. Why won't he stand up and say, "Enough! Let's just impeach this bastard!"

At this point, I could feel the tension in the room as Beth and the other participants exchanged glances as if to say, "Great—now they're gonna think we're a bunch of nuts!" Taking action to restore the emotional tone and redirect the message, Beth jumped in before the congressional staffers could respond:

Some of us certainly agree with what he just said, but I want to make it clear that we're not here today to ask Representative [name omitted] to push for impeachment. We just want to ask him to support this resolution to prevent us from getting stuck in another war that we don't need to fight.

This statement validated the veteran's sentiment and reframed it in a less threatening way, thus returning the performance to the emotional script and getting us back on message.

Hosts performed similar roles at other events. At the Cindy Sheehan vigil, for example, a local activist named George who had volunteered to help organize the event stood on a ledge surrounding the fountain around which we had arranged the attendees. To set the emotional tone for the evening, he reminded people that the vigil was intended to solemnly honor the soldiers who had been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. One attendee piped up, "Let's not forget the thousands of civilians that have been killed too!" George acknowledged his point and integrated this new meaning into the overall solemnity of the vigil, saying, "Yes, thank you. Let's light our candles tonight for *all* of the innocent lives lost in these wars, whether soldier or civilian." With that, the council coordinator Kurtis, George, and I began lighting peoples' candles, and, in hushed tones, asked them to light their neighbors' candles. For the next forty-five minutes, nearly all of the roughly 800 attendees stood silently in concentric circles, many with their heads bowed.

A cameraman for the local newspaper moved silently through the crowd snapping photos, while the murmur of George responding to a reporters' questions could be heard in the background. There was occasional whispering and shuffling of feet as a few participants left early, but overall the participants stuck very closely to the script. At the end of the event, George again stepped onto the ledge, and began humming "Amazing Grace." Without any further verbal

prompt, the humming quickly spread throughout the crowd. For the next few minutes hundreds of people hummed together, some swaying slowly to the sound of the song. With the last hummed chord, George solemnly said, “Thank you. Have a good night.” With that, the performance was over. Participants blew out their candles and slowly dispersed into the night.

MANAGED RESPONSE

MoveOn’s scripting of emotions continued even after the events. In follow-up e-mails, participants were given cues as to how members should feel about the actions in which they recently participated. These cues essentially encapsulated the “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1983) MoveOn constructed for events. They included statements from MoveOn staffers and event participants, as well as photos from events across the country. I refer to this process as *managed response* because it is a top-down effort to frame the outcome of events as well as the appropriate emotional responses to these events.

Managed response e-mails followed a fairly consistent format. First, MoveOn provided an overview statement that framed the event as effective and portrayed an image of collective efficacy. An e-mail I received the day after the Iran petition delivery, for example, framed the event in this way:

Yesterday, all over the country, MoveOn members turned out in force to tell Congress to stop President Bush’s march to war with Iran.... From Paducah, KY, to San Diego, CA, MoveOn members delivered a clear message that constituents want their elected officials to oppose Bush’s rush to war.... These actions really matter—personal visits to offices show that Americans really care about this issue. And the fact they happened all over the country means Congress will really sit up and take notice (12/14/07 e-mail).

These framing statements were followed by quotes from participants about their great experiences at the events. These comments were used to create a sense of solidarity among event participants despite the geographic separation of their individual events, and helped frame how participants should feel about the events. After the Cindy Sheehan vigil, MoveOn sent an e-mail that included comments from nine members about the best moments in their vigils. One woman reported that the best part was “to know that you are not alone, and that there are others in your own community who are so supportive of Cindy Sheehan and finding a new way.” Another recounted a moment when “two or three Vietnam veterans happened upon our vigil and joined in with love, tears, and peace in their hearts. They were very grateful” (8/18/05 e-mail). These comments were supported by photos from events across the country that visually modeled the appropriate emotional response to the vigil. One photo included a mother and daughter lighting candles together, while another showed candles placed beneath a photo of a soldier who had presumably been killed in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The emotional frame constructed through comments and photos from the events was supplemented by reports of news coverage. These reports essentially quantified the success of the events, and reinforced the importance of media attention as the primary goal of these events. In its report of the Bush-McCain Challenge, MoveOn included two quotes from news articles about the events, and noted, “as more and more news articles and stories keep pouring in, it’s becoming clear that voters and the news media are starting to realize just how similar Bush and McCain really are” (5/29/08a e-mail).

As a regional coordinator, I also received an internal e-mail from a member of MoveOn’s staff about the results of the Bush-McCain Challenge. It sent a more mixed message about the success of the events. On the one hand, the staffer noted that one of the main “challenges” of the

event was the fact that “we only got media coverage at about 1/3 of our actions.” On the other hand, she reiterated that the events were “really powerful,” and reported, “we’re still seeing the articles and clippings pour in,” indicating that the events were largely successful. To further solidify this frame, she included links to eight newspaper articles and television reports on the Bush-McCain Challenge events (5/29/08b e-mail). This message was an interesting example of how the occasionally disappointing realities of political organizing were acknowledged back stage among organizers, while a narrative about the success of the events was maintained in the front stage for participants. The somewhat contradictory tone of this message also showed that MoveOn’s staff was still interested in maintaining a positive frame overall for its organizers, so they did not get discouraged. Thus, what seemed like back stage for regional coordinators was, in fact, just another layer of front stage for MoveOn’s staff.

CONCLUSION

This chapter shows how MoveOn carefully orchestrated its offline events with an eye toward its overall strategy, which was intensely focused on spreading messages through “earned” media coverage. From the back stage council trainings to the front stage of the performances themselves, MoveOn had a hand in shaping participants’ perceptions, actions, and emotions. All of this stage direction helped MoveOn control its message and public image despite the fact that it relied upon of thousands of volunteers with various levels of experience and potentially quite divergent political views to translate its strategic vision into action.

In the next chapter, I turn to an analysis of MoveOn’s effectiveness in shaping national policies and elections, media messages, and contemporary models of collective action.

CHAPTER 8: MEASURING MOVEON'S INFLUENCE

“Success” is a notoriously difficult outcome to define and determine in social movement research. Because of the types of changes movements seek and the number of other groups simultaneously working on issues, it is hard to establish causal relationships between movement goals and outcomes (Earl 2000). Researchers attempting to measure movement success have mostly focused on political outcomes, such as policy changes or signs of electoral influence (Amenta and Caren 2004; Andrews 1997; Gamson [1975] 1990; McAdam 1999). Other studies have argued that a movement’s ability to shape news coverage of issues can be used as an indicator of success (Earl 2004; Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Gitlin 1980; Oliver and Maney 2000; Ryan 1991). Rather than trying to determine success as such, some scholars have examined “spillover” effects (Meyer and Whittier 1994), “spin-off” (McAdam 1995) effects, and the effects a movement has upon countermovement organizations (Lo 1982; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Mottl 1980; Zald and Useem 1987). Movement spillover occurs when organizations within the same movement mimic the tactics, structure, and/or the ideology of a leading organization. In movement spin-off, members of a leading organization leave to form new organizations. Lastly, countermovement organizations often adopt similar tactics and structures as movement organizations, but use these to pursue opposing goals.

In this chapter, I assess MoveOn’s influence by examining each of these areas. I first trace the outcomes of policies and candidates supported by MoveOn. Next, I track MoveOn’s attempts to influence media narratives through public events and letters to the editor. Lastly, I show how MoveOn’s model of online organizing has influenced other progressive and conservative activist groups.

POLITICAL SUCCESS

MoveOn attempted to influence national politics by rallying support for issues and candidates through e-mail action requests, and encouraging members to invest time and money into selected political campaigns. MoveOn hoped to directly influence legislation via citizen lobbying, and indirectly shape legislative decisions by helping elect progressive (or at least Democratic) congressional and presidential candidates.

USING E-MAIL FOR POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Because MoveOn's primary tool for mobilizing members was its e-mail list, I catalogued all of the e-mail action requests I received between 2006 and 2009. I chose this time period because it included two election years and two non-election years, and was thus a good representation of MoveOn's issue and election work. Of the 813 MoveOn e-mails I received over the four years, three-quarters (601) included at least one form of action request. The number of requests was surprisingly consistent, ranging from 144 in 2008 to 154 in 2007. This meant that MoveOn requested some sort of action of me every two to three days, not including the requests I received as a member of my local MoveOn council (278) or during my eight-month stint as a regional coordinator in 2008 (599 additional messages). Because MoveOn was able to parse its e-mail list by level of activity, region, issue interest, and other factors, each member received a slightly different set of action requests. More active members like myself were contacted more frequently, and received more requests to host or attend offline events. Nonetheless, my catalog of e-mails represented a thorough list of the actions requested by MoveOn during this four-year period.

MoveOn's most common request (22.6%) was for donations for advertisements, candidates, or its get-out-the-vote programs. Invitations to host or attend events were second

highest (21.1%). I suspect this figure was disproportionately high in my case because I had a history of participation in offline events, and therefore was targeted for recruitment more frequently than less active members. Requests to call congressional offices or voters ranked third (17.3%), while petition signature requests—once MoveOn’s bread and butter—came in fourth (16.6%). Feedback and voting requests (11.5%), letter-writing solicitations (6.2%) and requests to forward messages or post them to Facebook or Twitter (4.7%) rounded out the list.

To trace the outcomes of issues and candidates, I searched election results and Congressional records available online through OpenCongress.org, the Center for Responsive Politics, and Wikipedia. It was difficult to track the progress of relevant legislation for several reasons. First, because MoveOn rarely specified bill numbers or titles in its action requests, I had to use my best judgment to ascertain what pieces of legislation MoveOn supported. Secondly, there were often multiple bills pertaining to a single issue, only some of which made it through Congress. Determining which of these similar bills MoveOn supported was difficult and sometimes impossible. Thirdly, so many legislators, lobbyists, and interest groups shaped the bills that *did* pass that it was impossible to tease out MoveOn’s unique influence (if any) upon the final legislation. In short, there was no way to determine a causal relationship between MoveOn’s citizen lobbying and legislative outcomes. Fortunately, determinations of electoral outcomes were much easier, although causation could still not be determined.

Rather than making causal claims, I defined “success” as a correlation between MoveOn’s goals and legislative or electoral outcomes, and “failure” as an absence of such correlations. I established five codes for success and failure, which are listed below in Table 1. As their names imply, “Unambiguous Wins” and “Unambiguous Losses” were clear-cut. An example of the former was the 2008 passage of federal funding for AIDS prevention in poor nations

(OpenCongress.org 2010a), while MoveOn’s failure to prevent Maine from repealing its same-sex marriage law in 2009 was an example of the latter (Cover 2009). Results in the “Majority” categories included some but not all outcomes desired by MoveOn. For example, when Congress restored full funding to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in 2007 but did not make this funding permanent as MoveOn had hoped, I categorized the result as a “Majority Win” (Corporation for Public Broadcasting 2010). As would be expected, the “Evenly Split” category included a mixture of outcomes such that I could not determine whether the results constituted failure or success for MoveOn. A prime example was progressive candidate Ned Lamont’s victory over Joe Lieberman in the Democratic primary in Connecticut in 2006, which was followed by his defeat by Lieberman (who ran as an Independent) in the general election.

Table 1: Outcomes of MoveOn E-mail Action Requests, 2006-2009

Outcome	2006	%	2007	%	2008	%	2009	%	TOTAL	%
Unambiguous Win	6	17.6%	9	25%	11	39.3%	5	17.2%	31	23.1%
Majority Win	3	8.8%	2	5.6%	0	0%	2	6.9%	7	5.2%
Evenly Split	2	5.9%	1	2.8%	2	7.1%	1	3.4%	6	4.5%
Majority Loss	2	5.9%	1	2.8%	1	3.6%	3	10.3%	7	5.2%
Unambiguous Loss	6	17.6%	13	36.1%	6	21.4%	4	13.8%	29	21.6%
Indeterminate*	7	20.6%	2	5.6%	4	14.3%	9	31%	22	16.4%
Symbolic/Message	8	23.5%	8	22.2%	4	14.3%	12	41.3%	32	23.9%
TOTAL	34		36		28		29		134	

* “Indeterminate” results included outcomes that could not be determined due to lack of specificity in MoveOn’s goals or (especially in 2009) legislative decisions that were still pending.

To assess MoveOn’s success, I condensed the “Unambiguous” and “Majority” categories into general “Success” and “Failure” categories, and omitted “Indeterminate” and “Symbolic/Message” action requests from consideration. This analysis revealed that MoveOn achieved success in thirty-eight (47.5%) and failed in thirty-six (45%) of eighty cases over four years. This trend generally held in each year, although there was some variation in 2007 and 2008. Although a rough 50/50 record may not seem admirable at first, it was a respectable record

for an organization that relied upon citizen action instead of lobbyists and insider deals to influence national politics. Indeed, in their meta-analysis of scholarship on policy change, Burstein and Linton (2002) also reported that political organizations, including social movement organizations, affected public policy no more than half of the time. These results should not be read as unambiguous evidence that MoveOn caused these results; the most that can be said is that MoveOn may have been part of the reason for the successes.

In addition to assessing MoveOn's success, I examined the cases in which it requested strictly symbolic or message-oriented actions. Requests categorized as "Symbolic/Message" focused on increasing public attention for issues or targeting certain people for their actions or comments. Symbolic action requests, like a petition demanding that Vice President Dick Cheney participate fully in an investigation of his role in leaking the name of a CIA agent, gave members an outlet for their frustrations and had the potential to raise the public visibility of issues (7/3/07 e-mail). Message requests were designed to spread MoveOn's version of a story by, for example, calling senators to say that Obama's tax increase on the wealthy was the right decision (3/16/09 e-mail) or forwarding a list of reasons Sonia Sotomayor was a good choice for the Supreme Court (5/26/09 e-mail). As Table 1 shows, nearly a quarter (23.9%) of MoveOn's action requests fell into this category. I was initially surprised by this fact, but upon reflection I began to understand the dual value of such actions. Symbolic and message-driven actions raised public awareness of issues, thus potentially increasing chances for success in explicit lobbying and election work. Perhaps more importantly, they allowed members to feel efficacious even when they could not have any real influence over issue outcomes, as in the Cheney case mentioned above. By directing members to engage in these symbolic actions, MoveOn allowed members to vent their frustrations in a way that maintained their enthusiasm and primed them for future

action.

MOBILIZING MONEY AND MEMBERS FOR ELECTIONS

Between 2000 and 2008, MoveOn raised millions of dollars and mobilized thousands of volunteers for Democratic congressional and presidential candidates. To assess MoveOn's influence, I tracked MoveOn's donations and volunteer mobilization for each election. To understand these results in context, I examined public opinion polls during election cycles and compared MoveOn's mobilization efforts to those of four other prominent progressive political action committees.

Congressional Elections

Between 2000 and 2008, MoveOn contributed over \$10.5 million to Democratic candidates in 204 congressional elections (Center for Responsive Politics 2002, 2003, 2006, 2007a, 2010a; MoveOn.org 2006). In addition to funding, some candidates received help in the form of MoveOn-created television ads and volunteer hours from MoveOn members. Table 2 summarizes MoveOn's fundraising and results over these five elections.

Table 2: Congressional Candidates Supported by MoveOn, 2000-2008

Year	Candidates Supported	Funds Raised	Won	Lost	Win %
2000	28	\$66,000	12	16	42.9%
2002	28	\$118,089	10	18	35.7%
2004	53	\$242,413	17	36	32.1%
2006	64	\$6,040,420 [^]	38	26	59.4%
2008	31	\$4,122,727	22	9	71.0%
TOTAL	204	\$10,589,649	99	105	48.5%

All from Center for Responsive Politics (2002, 2003, 2006, 2007a, 2010a) except [^] (MoveOn.org 2006)

MoveOn's fundraising in 2000 was driven by its "We Will Not Forget" campaign, in which 18,500 members pledged \$12.6 million to candidates running against members of Congress who had voted to impeach President Clinton in 1998 (Healy 1999). By the time the 2000 election season was over, however, MoveOn actually raised only \$66,000 for twenty-eight

candidates, only twelve of which were victorious. In 2002, MoveOn again supported twenty-eight candidates (not all the same as in 2000), but bumped its contributions up to \$118,089. This increase in funding did not lead to more wins, though; in fact, eighteen of MoveOn's candidates lost their races that year. This trend continued in 2004, when MoveOn's \$242,413 in funds helped only seventeen of fifty-five supported candidates win their congressional election battles. Overall, this poor performance suggested that the presence or absence of MoveOn's support did not matter much as an indicator of candidates' likely success in these three elections.

A potential reason for MoveOn's low win percentage (35.8%) over these elections may have been that it tended to support candidates who were facing close races. To see if this was a contributing factor, I compared MoveOn's performance to the results of competitive House and Senate races (decided by 10% or less of the popular vote) in which candidates were not supported by MoveOn. This sample included 29 House and 6 Senate seats in 2000, 27 House and 7 Senate seats in 2002, and 9 House and no Senate seats in 2004. Across all three elections, MoveOn-supported House candidates *underperformed* relative to non-supported candidates, winning only 28% of races versus 62% won by non-supported candidates. Senate candidates supported by MoveOn in 2000 and 2002 were marginally more likely to win than those not supported (no comparison was possible in 2004, as there were no competitive Senate races in which MoveOn did not provide support), but the number of Senate candidates in each category—between five and seven—was so low that the results would have been different if a single election would have turned out differently. Given the dramatic difference between MoveOn- and non-supported House candidates and the inconclusive evidence from Senate races, it does not appear that MoveOn's poor performance in these congressional elections was simply a result of its support for candidates facing competitive races.

This lackluster record may have resulted from larger political trends during the first half of the 2000s. As political opportunity theory shows, a movement's chances of success are largely influenced by factors beyond the movement's control, including the structure of the political system, the dominant political party, and public opinion (Diani 1996; King and Husting 2003; Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995; McAdam 1999). With a strong economy and no wars going on in 2000, voters were disengaged from the election, and many thought that "things will pretty much be the same" regardless of whether George W. Bush or Al Gore was elected president (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2000). Gore's image suffered from his connection to the scandal-ridden Clinton administration (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 1999), and this opened the door for Bush's contentious victory in 2000. The 2002 election occurred under the shadow of 9/11, when Bush's approval rating hit 90% and Americans supported a military response to the terrorist attacks. This support carried over to the congressional elections, where a majority of Republicans said they voted as a show of support for Bush (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2002). Even in 2004, when casualties in Iraq were rising and the economy was shaky, majorities of likely voters supported the Iraq war and believed the Bush administration was making America safer (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004). During these years, the Democrats were fighting an uphill battle, and MoveOn's losing record reflected the political and cultural context of these challenging times.

Public opinion and political fortunes began to shift in the Democrats' favor in the latter half of the decade. With rising gas prices, the worsening situation in Iraq, and the Bush administration's failed response to Hurricane Katrina fresh in their minds, voters went to the polls in 2006 blaming Republicans for the nation's ills (Pew Research Center for the People and

the Press 2006a, b). This anti-Republican sentiment resulted in a sweeping victory for Democrats, who won thirty-one seats in the House and six in the Senate. In 2008, increasing disapproval of Bush's handling of the Iraq war, combined with excitement over the presidential candidacy of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, stoked enthusiasm among Democrats (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2008a, b). Obama's unprecedented campaign inspired many Democrats and progressives to get involved, and drove an election cycle in which Democrats gained twenty-one House seats and eight Senate seats.

These favorable conditions were reflected in MoveOn's results in the 2006 and 2008 elections. In 2006, MoveOn provided over \$6 million in support to sixty-four congressional candidates, and also ran television advertisements and its "Call for Change" get-out-the-vote program for many candidates. These efforts resulted in thirty-eight victories, or a winning percentage of 59.4%, much better than its 32.1% record in 2004. Not too surprisingly, candidates who received more money were more likely to win, as were those who benefitted from MoveOn's ads and the "Call for Change" program. When compared with competitive races in which MoveOn did not provide support (eighteen in the House and three in the Senate), these results proved even more impressive. While MoveOn-supported candidates won 55.6% of their House races and 90% of their Senate races, non-supported Democratic candidates in competitive races only won 44.4% of House and 33.3% of Senate races. These differences appeared to indicate that MoveOn's support increased candidates' chances of winning relative to candidates without such support.

A similar pattern emerged in 2008, when MoveOn provided \$4.1 million to thirty-one congressional candidates. Of these, twenty-two won their elections, a 71% winning percentage. Again, there was some evidence that candidates who received higher amounts of money were

more likely to win, but regardless of the level of support received, candidates supported by MoveOn had a higher winning percentage than non-supported candidates. MoveOn-supported candidates won 76.2% of their House races, compared to only 43.9% of non-supported Democrats in competitive races. Likewise, six of ten MoveOn-supported Senate candidates were victorious, as compared to one of two non-supported candidates.

Aside from considering the political and cultural context in which MoveOn was working, I also wanted to evaluate its election work in comparison to other prominent progressive organizations. I compared MoveOn's electoral contributions to those made to the same candidates by four organizations: Democracy for America (DFA), EMILY's List, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and ActBlue. I chose EMILY's List, SEIU, and ActBlue because, along with MoveOn, they were consistently among the top six PACs in the country that supported Democrats (Center for Responsive Politics 2010b). DFA, which grew out of Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign, did not raise as much money as the other groups (including MoveOn), but it organized get-out-the-vote programs like MoveOn.

I found that MoveOn's fundraising was generally on par with these organizations, but it was occasionally overshadowed. In 2006, for example, MoveOn spent \$28.1 million on election work (\$6.5 of which was directly donated to candidates), while EMILY's List spent \$34.3 million (Center for Responsive Politics 2007a, b). Likewise, in 2008, MoveOn's \$38.1 million in expenditures was trumped by the \$47.4 million spent by SEIU and \$54.4 million donated through ActBlue (Center for Responsive Politics 2010a, c, d). Furthermore, candidates supported by MoveOn often received comparable or even superior amounts of financial support from these organizations, not to mention individuals and groups not in my sample.

Thus, while MoveOn's increased fundraising and election work corresponded to a higher

winning percentage among Democrats in 2006 and 2008, the increase cannot be traced back solely to MoveOn. The correlation between MoveOn's work and electoral outcomes resulted from a combination of favorable public opinion and the efforts of multiple organizations functioning in the context of a progressive movement that was maturing and becoming more influential in the latter half of the twenty-first century (Kerbel 2009).

Presidential Elections

The 2004 and 2008 presidential elections presented new challenges in terms of defining success. Was success defined only by the outcome of the race, or by an organization's ability to mobilize great numbers of people who otherwise may not have been involved in the political process? MoveOn's election work for Kerry and Obama showed the value of measuring success by both of these standards.

For the 2004 presidential election, MoveOn wanted to mobilize members for on-the-ground campaign work. It developed the "Leave No Voter Behind" (LNVB) program, which enabled members to download lists of targeted voters in their neighborhoods so they could conduct door-to-door voter outreach drives in their own communities. Through this program, MoveOn members contacted nearly 2.7 million voters who were unlikely to be contacted by the Democratic Party, and increased voter turnout among Kerry supporters in battleground states by 9% relative to voters in the same category who were not contacted through LNVB (Middleton and Green 2008). In total, MoveOn spent \$10.8 million in support of Kerry and another \$1.5 million against Bush (Center for Responsive Politics 2006). It also raised almost \$14 million through MoveOn Voter Fund, a 527 organization that MoveOn created to be able to accept multi-million dollar donations from progressive philanthropists like George Soros (Federal Election Commission 2004). It ran television ads criticizing President Bush, and organized

events ranging from bake sales to a concert tour to raise money for Kerry (MoveOn.org 2010).

Despite these efforts, Bush was re-elected in November 2004. His victory stemmed in part from a massive get-out-the-vote drive planned by Karl Rove for the final 72 hours before the election (York 2005), but it was also helped by ads run by the ostensibly non-partisan 527 organization Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVT). This organization outspent MoveOn in television ad buys by \$5 million dollars, and received an inordinate amount of press attention for its ads claiming that John Kerry was lying about his service in Vietnam. SBVT's ads caused many voters to doubt Kerry's record in Vietnam (Malone 2004), and undercut MoveOn's attempts to shape public opinions about Bush and Kerry. Although it raised millions of dollars and increased voter turnout, MoveOn ultimately failed in its goal to get Kerry elected (or perhaps more accurately, to prevent Bush from getting re-elected).

The 2008 election was a different story. Democrats were riding high after their sweep of Congress in 2006, and this enthusiasm was stoked by a Democratic primary that was truly historic. When Barack Obama finally secured the Democratic nomination in the early summer of 2008, his campaign used the internet to raise unprecedented amounts of donations and organize millions of supporters (Vargas 2008). A report published two weeks before the election noted that "liberal Democrats" (aka "progressives") were far more engaged in the election and more likely to volunteer than any other group, including their counterparts on the right, conservative Republicans (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2008b). In this environment, it was not difficult for MoveOn to mobilize dollars and people for the Obama campaign.

Because the Obama campaign had already established a system that in many ways mimicked MoveOn's 2004 and 2006 get-out-the-vote programs (see "Campaign Adaptations of MoveOn's Model" below), MoveOn opted to function as a "recruitment engine" for Obama

(MoveOn.org 2008b). It recruited volunteers for Obama's campaign offices, reached out to voters in battleground states, and ran a youth voter registration drive that registered nearly half a million new voters. By the end of Election Day, MoveOn had recruited 933,800 volunteers who worked over 20.8 million hours in Obama campaign offices (MoveOn.org 2008b). It also forwarded \$1.7 million in earmarked contributions to Obama, spent almost \$5 million of its own money advocating for the candidate, and spent a little over \$1 million on ads attacking John McCain (Federal Election Commission 2008).

MoveOn undoubtedly contributed to Obama's victory, but as with the congressional elections it was only one of many important players. While MoveOn provided nearly \$6.8 million in support to Obama, SEIU reported a whopping \$27.7 million in expenditures (Center for Responsive Politics 2010c). It also mobilized members to knock on 3.6 million doors, make 16.5 million calls to voters, and register nearly a quarter of a million new voters (Service Employees International Union 2008). The Obama campaign was also very successful in fundraising and volunteer mobilization. It broke multiple fundraising records while raising a total of \$750 million for the election (Center for Responsive Politics 2008), and used the internet in addition to its fifty-state field operation to mobilize millions of volunteers (Vargas 2008).

As with the congressional election results, I cannot infer a causal relation between MoveOn's election work in 2008 and Obama's victory. Given that his margin of victory in the national popular vote was over 8.5 million people, it is likely that even without MoveOn's help Obama would have won. Moreover, the Obama campaign and many other groups also contributed to this victory with both money and volunteers. Finally, public opinion had shifted in the Democrats' favor by 2008, creating a cultural climate that was ready for the change that Obama so often promised. Even though the magnitude of MoveOn's influence upon Obama's

election cannot be determined in light of these other considerations, by a simple goal-outcome definition of success MoveOn was successful in 2008 simply because Obama won the election. This is in contrast to 2004, when MoveOn significantly improved voter turnout for Kerry but nonetheless lost the election (Middleton and Green 2008). In 2004, then, MoveOn was successful in developing demonstrably valuable voter outreach tools but unsuccessful in achieving its ultimate goal, while in 2008 MoveOn supported the winning candidate but its specific contribution to this victory is unclear.

MESSAGING SUCCESS

Aside from trying to directly influence the legislative and electoral processes, MoveOn focused on shaping media coverage of issues. By staging simultaneous local actions, MoveOn hoped to place its messages in media markets of all sizes through “earned media,” publicity gained by creating newsworthy stories rather than paying for advertising time. MoveOn also encouraged members to include its talking points in letters to their local newspapers. Through these methods, MoveOn tried to shift public opinion and pressure legislators who, it hoped, would interpret these messages as the demands of their constituents.

To track media coverage of MoveOn’s public actions, I selected fifteen media markets of different sizes and in different regions of the country on the basis of the most recent Nielsen television market rankings and 2009 newspaper circulation figures (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2009; TVJobs.com 2009)⁶. In terms of Nielsen rankings, which are based on the number of households reached in a given market, the selected markets ranged from number one (New York, NY) to 195 (Eureka, CA) (TVJobs.com 2009). It was important to include small and mid-sized media markets in this analysis because, as the previous chapter showed, one of the central

⁶ A complete list of these media markets is available in the Appendix.

components of MoveOn's strategy was to coordinate media events in small towns as well as big cities, and thereby create an "echo chamber" effect wherein local coverage led to national coverage. Using Lexis Nexis, I searched newspapers in these media markets for articles about MoveOn published between 2006 and 2009.

To find letters to the editor (LTEs) written by members at MoveOn's urging, I selected phrases from the twenty-one LTE requests MoveOn made in e-mail messages sent to members between 2006 and 2009. Using three internet search engines (Google, Bing, Yahoo) and Lexis Nexis, I searched for letters using exact phrases provided by MoveOn within one month after each request. Because I searched for exact phrases suggested by MoveOn, this method may have missed LTEs that were written in members' own words. Nonetheless, I captured many examples of what some call "astroturf" letters, in which members of political groups use talking points verbatim or simply add their names to pre-written letters (Klotz 2007; Reader 2005, 2008).

COVERAGE OF MOVEON'S ACTIONS

Over the four years, 725 articles mentioning MoveOn appeared in the fifteen media markets I examined. Of these, only one quarter (182 articles) covered MoveOn's message, while the remaining articles either mentioned MoveOn in passing or were about MoveOn as an organization, not about its position on a given issue. Of the 182 that covered MoveOn's message, 41 (22.5%) covered a television or print ad, 79 (43.4%) covered an event, and another 26 (14.3%) announced an upcoming event. Taken together, that means that nearly sixty percent of articles covering MoveOn's messages relied upon real-world events as the sources of those messages. Thus, while the majority of coverage did not directly address MoveOn's messages, the articles that did were overwhelmingly driven by local-level events organized by MoveOn members. MoveOn's strategy of training local councils to generate "earned media" was clearly

bearing fruit.

Reports from small and mid-sized media markets often included descriptions of local events, and occasionally quoted local MoveOn members. A representative example was the *Albuquerque Journal's* coverage of a candlelight vigil in Santa Fe, New Mexico:

About 200 Santa Feans gathered for a candlelight vigil in front of the Roundhouse on Wednesday night, joining peace activists around the United States in marking the fifth anniversary of the Iraq war. "Hundreds of vigils like this are happening all over the country. We are sending a message to our leaders. We're saying, 'Bring our troops home,'" said Stephanie Roth of MoveOn.org, the political group which helped organize the event (Hay 2008).

Although it was not common, local newspapers occasionally covered MoveOn's national events and advertisements.

Such coverage appeared more frequently in larger media markets. For example, *The New York Times* ran several articles quoting MoveOn's ads and discussing their merits, including analysis of the controversial "General Petraeus or General Betray Us?" ad that ran on its own pages. It also reported on multiple national events, such as 1,200 vigils attended by 37,000 people on the fourth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq (Sander 2007). These markets also relied more upon official statements than quotes from members. For example, during the struggle in 2006 between incumbent Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman and his Democratic challenger, Ned Lamont, *The New York Times* quoted MoveOn's executive director regarding the organization's position on the race:

"We think it's outrageous that Lieberman would hold himself above the democratic process with a small 'd,'" Eli Pariser, executive director of the liberal

group MoveOn.org, which is backing Mr. Lamont, said in an interview yesterday.

“Ultimately we read it as a sign that Ned Lamont, and people like him who have the support from our members, are breaking into a culture that’s been locked off by consultants,” Mr. Pariser said (Healy and Medina 2006).

Discussion of content created by MoveOn and reliance upon official statements meant that MoveOn was able to directly insert its talking points into media narratives without having to rely upon inexperienced members to convey these messages.

My analysis revealed few clear trends in news coverage of MoveOn’s events and advertisements. To my surprise, newspapers in larger media markets did not cover its messages more frequently than those in rural areas. For example, the largest media market in the country, the New York City market (represented by *The New York Times*), had the tenth-highest percentage of articles covering MoveOn’s messages (21.6%), while the highest percentage of message coverage appeared in Spokane, Washington’s *Spokesman Review* (55.6%). Message coverage was also not clearly correlated with the dominant political powers in media markets. The top two highest-ranking markets by percentage of message coverage included cities in safe Republican districts (Spokane, WA, and Lincoln-Hastings-Kearney, NE), the third (Albuquerque-Santa Fe, NM) leaned Democratic, and the fourth (Monterey-Salinas, CA) was safely Democratic (Wikipedia.org 2010a).

In fact, the only clear trend that emerged was a steady increase in the percentage of articles covering MoveOn’s messages between 2006 and 2009. Message coverage across all fifteen markets increased from 20.3% of all articles in 2006 to 40.3% in 2009. In other words, the likelihood that MoveOn’s message would be covered doubled over the four-year period. The yearly increase showed MoveOn’s ability to spread its messages through earned media

coverage was not tied to the national election cycle, which would have caused dips in 2007 and 2009. The best explanation for this increase was that MoveOn's councils became both more numerous and organized during the period I analyzed, potentially resulting in more local events and better media relations work on the local level. As the previous chapter showed, MoveOn spent a lot of time and energy training councils to hold effective media events. These councils became more organized and media savvy, and drummed up increased news coverage in smaller media markets. When combined with coverage of official statements and advertisements, this created an "echo chamber" effect in which the large number of simultaneous local events caught the attention of news outlets in larger markets. The combination of earned and paid media spread MoveOn's messages across the country.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Another example of earned media was MoveOn's "astroturf" letters to the editor (LTE) strategy. Such letters were not unique to MoveOn. They first came to public attention in 2003, when the Republican National Committee asked supporters to send identical letters applauding President Bush's economic plan to newspapers around the world (Magee 2003; Tynan 2003). By the mid-2000s, mainstream political organizations like the RNC and advocacy groups like MoveOn were using such letters to shape public opinion of issues and candidates. Newspaper editors and academics derided astroturf LTEs as "propaganda" and "plagiarized participation" (Dzwonkowski 2004; Klotz 2007; Lee 2003; Reader 2005, 2008), but leaders of advocacy groups, including MoveOn's executive director, claimed the letters were a legitimate expression of the political opinions of people who were too busy to participate in other ways (Glaser 2004; Lee 2003; Reader 2008).

Despite the outcry among newspaper editors, MoveOn continued to encourage members to

include its talking points in LTEs. On August 15, 2006, for example, MoveOn asked members to write letters criticizing the Bush administration's handling of the Iraq war. It included five talking points for members, including the statement, "The war in Iraq has diverted attention from protecting America from terrorism" (8/15/06 e-mail). A search for this phrase on Google, Bing, Yahoo, and Lexis Nexis uncovered thirteen LTEs. Searches for four other talking points from the same LTE request revealed twenty-one additional LTEs, for a total of thirty-four LTEs printed on the basis of a single request. The average number of printed LTEs per request was twenty, but results ranged from zero to sixty-two. Most of these letters appeared in small or mid-sized newspapers, although large papers like the *Houston Chronicle* and *USA Today* also printed at least one letter each over the four years. The number of printed LTEs per year varied from a low of 49 in 2008 to a high of 145 in 2009, but there was no discernible trend in frequency or location of publication over time. In total, MoveOn succeeded in getting at least 421 LTEs printed between 2006 and 2009. This total does not include substantially reworded LTEs or letters posted on blogs or elsewhere online.

Even though they usually were not entirely identical, letters showed obvious signs of being based on the same template. In response to a request in March 2006 to emphasize that "the Bush pre-emption doctrine has been a disaster in Iraq" (3/16/06 e-mail), for example, members wrote the three letters excerpted below, which were published within four days of one another in Vermont, Florida, and Oregon, respectively:

At this three year anniversary of the war in Iraq, I must remind the country that the Bush pre-emption doctrine has been a disaster in Iraq—making America and the world less safe (*Brattleboro Reformer*).

This is a war with no meaning and no end. The president is trying to distract the

public with a ‘new’ policy direction. We must know by now that the Bush pre-emption doctrine has been a disaster in Iraq, making America and the world less safe (*St. Petersburg Times*).

The Bush pre-emption doctrine has been a disaster in Iraq, making America and the world less safe. Congress has a responsibility to stand up to the president and insist on an exit strategy (*The Oregonian*).

Sometimes multiple, slightly different versions of the same LTE appeared in the same issue of a newspaper. Other times, a paper printed multiple letters over time, as when *The North County Times* in San Diego, California, printed a series of four letters arguing “Senator Russ Feingold is standing up to the Bush administration’s attack on our Constitution” between March 30 and April 21, 2006.

It is impossible to say how many letters sent by MoveOn members were never printed for various reasons. Most likely, editors who disdained astroturfing barred a significant proportion of these letters from publication. Nonetheless, the publication of at least 421 individual MoveOn LTes over four years proved that this messaging strategy was successful.

MODELING SUCCESS

Along with influencing policy, elections, and public opinion, MoveOn’s very presence shaped the political landscape in more fundamental ways. Netroots activists and political commentators have repeatedly identified MoveOn as a pioneer of internet activism, but have not supported these claims with research (Hayes 2008; Hickey 2004; Stoller 2008). To determine more concretely whether MoveOn was a model for other online organizations, I contacted staff at thirteen progressive and seven conservative internet-based political organizations. Although none of the conservative groups responded to repeated requests for interviews, I interviewed

representatives of five progressive groups. I also analyzed the websites of all twenty groups, and gathered e-mail messages from eleven progressive and three conservative organizations (the other groups did not send any messages during the three months I was subscribed to their lists). To assess MoveOn's influence on political campaigns, I also analyzed Howard Dean and Barack Obama's presidential campaigns.

PROGRESSIVE ORGANIZATIONS MODELED AFTER MOVEON

Progressive activists adapted MoveOn's model for state, national, and international organizations. MoveOn's influence was also apparent in the presidential campaigns of Howard Dean and Barack Obama.

State-Level Progressive Organizations

The leading example of state-level adaptation of MoveOn's model was ProgressNow.org, a Colorado-based organization that later developed a network of nine state-level progressive groups. Bobby Clark, a veteran of the Dean campaign, formed ProgressNow in 2005. After Dean's campaign ended, Clark returned to Colorado to organize progressives for state issues using the techniques he had learned from Joe Trippi, Dean's campaign manager, and Zack Exley, a MoveOn staffer who helped the Dean campaign develop its online tools. When he launched ProgressNow in August 2005, MoveOn helped by sending a recruitment message to its Colorado members (8/23/05 e-mail). Much like MoveOn, ProgressNow referred to itself as "a year-round, never-ending progressive campaign" and "a marketing department for progressive ideas," explicitly acknowledging its business orientation to politics (ProgressNow.org 2010, ProgressNowColorado.org 2010). It advocated for many of the same issues as MoveOn (the Iraq war and health care reform, to name two), but also carved out a niche for state-specific issues like support for legislation that prevented payday loan offices from charging exorbitant interest

rates (ProgressNowColorado.org 2010).

Like MoveOn, ProgressNow used its e-mail list to shape messages and mobilize support for issues. It raised money for ads and candidates, asked members to sign petitions or call congressional offices, and organized local media events. The tone of these messages was similar to MoveOn as well, with its mixture of informal language and calls to action. In a February 2007 message about proposed oil drilling in western Colorado, for example, ProgressNow told the story of how a local woman “could smell the fumes from her front porch,” and claimed that the drilling “could imperil more than a million acres.” It then asked members to “join this public outcry” by clicking on a link and signing an online petition (ProgressNowAction.org 2/26/07 e-mail)⁷.

After developing its own capabilities, ProgressNow reached out to similar groups to form the ProgressNow network of state-based online organizations. This network included Courage Campaign, a California-based group that was also founded in 2005 by a veteran of Howard Dean’s campaign. Courage Campaign advocated for universal health care, environmental protection, and other broadly progressive issues; however, with the 2008 passage of Proposition 8, a law that denied same-sex couples in California the right to marry, it shifted increasingly toward being a GLBTQ rights organization first and a general progressive organization second (CourageCampaign.org 2010). Despite this shift in issue priorities, Courage Campaign’s message style was still very similar to MoveOn’s e-mail rhetoric. In May 2010, Dr. George Rekers, a conservative leader who advocated “conversion therapy” to turn homosexuals into heterosexuals, was caught with a young man he had contacted through an escort website called RentBoy.com. Courage Campaign used this scandal as an opportunity to share the story of a gay

⁷ All referenced e-mail messages from other online activist organizations are listed alphabetically in the References section, after the chronological list of MoveOn e-mail messages.

man who had undergone conversion therapy. After telling of how the therapy “nearly drove him to suicide,” the e-mail asked members to “make sure this doesn’t happen to any more of our friends” by signing a letter that would be sent to conservative “pro-family” organizations demanding that they disavow conversion therapy (CouageCampaign.org 5/20/10 e-mail).

Other groups in the ProgressNow network also reflected MoveOn’s organizing philosophy and message style. Fuse, a group based in Washington State, said its power came from “real people generating stronger progressive leadership from elected officials,” and listed universal health care, environmental protection, protection of civil liberties, and an anti-war stance among its issues (FuseWashington.org 2010). The Alliance for a Better Minnesota, which was founded in 2008 in the midst of Al Franken’s battle to win the Senate seat held by Republican Norm Coleman, said it “provide[d] a unified voice for progressive groups on the issues that matter to most Minnesotans” (AllianceMinnesota.org 2010). Like MoveOn, its e-mail messages used informal language and an eye-catching subject lines or introductory phrases like “Toxic Sippy Cups?” to interest readers (AllianceMinnesota.org 5/10/10 e-mail). They followed this with a link, more details about the issue, another link, and a personal sign-off.

The leaders of three state-based organizations I interviewed all agreed that, as one put it, “everyone on the progressive side was inspired to some degree by MoveOn.” One explained MoveOn’s influence by saying, “I don’t know if there’s such a thing as the MoveOn school of advocacy, but we’re definitely enrolled in that school.” When I asked him to explain, he continued:

The whole tone of our e-mail is a message from a friend. We don’t heavily format it, we don’t have big graphic banners, we keep the language informal, we try to do no more than three or four paragraphs before the link.... And then also the same

philosophical orientation, that our e-mail is supposed to be a service to our members. We should be giving them things they want to do, as opposed to putting them to work for us.

The other two state-level leaders also pointed to the structure and underlying philosophy of MoveOn's e-mail messages as one of the most important things they adopted from its model. They understood the importance of e-mail as not just a tool for communicating messages or requesting actions, but in some sense as the glue that held together an online activist organization. As another leader explained:

MoveOn realized that doing stuff online is by definition an isolated act, because it's you sitting alone at your computer. So you have to show back out to all those people who feel like they're doing that in isolation that they're not, that it's collective action. And that inspires them to do more and get more people to do it. That's something that MoveOn drove, and that has been adopted in the left.

Of course, there were some departures from MoveOn's model. All three state-level leaders reported working extensively with other progressive groups in their states, something MoveOn did only occasionally on the national level. They explained that this practice grew out of necessity because their staffs did not have expertise in a wide variety of issues, and also because they wanted to mobilize more people than were on their own e-mail lists. Another difference reported by two organizational leaders was that they took a less partisan approach to issues in order to not alienate people who did not identify as progressives or Democrats but agreed with the organization's position on an issue. Despite these differences, all of the state-level leaders acknowledged MoveOn's importance as a pioneer of online activism, and recognized they were part of the MoveOn family tree.

National-Level Progressive Organizations

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, nearly every national political organization on both the left and right had a website and an e-mail list. These things alone did not mean that they were based on MoveOn's model. That being said, closer examination of six well-known national progressive organizations revealed that they were indeed using MoveOn's playbook.

Take for instance the following excerpts from messages sent by MoveOn and two other progressive organizations in May 2010 (with organizational references omitted). Here is Example #1:

Today, oil is washing over the fragile barrier islands and residents nearby are complaining about dead wildlife washing ashore and the stench of crude oil....

This disaster should be a wake-up call for Obama—but we must make sure he hears the alarm. Sign the petition calling for a ban on drilling today and we'll help stage a high-profile delivery in Washington next week to make sure your voice is heard.

And here is Example #2:

Bill Halter is running a people-powered campaign and volunteers are working non-stop to get out the vote for Election Day.... So we partnered with _____ and _____ to build a great new online tool that lets you call members in Arkansas and ask them to volunteer for Halter's campaign. Calling is fun and easy, and progressives in Arkansas are excited to learn about how they can help defeat Sen. Lincoln. Can you sign up to make calls?

And finally, Example #3:

Last week, I asked _____ members to help launch one of _____'s most

important campaigns ever—to end the stranglehold that big corporations and lobbyists have on our democracy.... I won't lie. This will face enormous opposition. And take years. But it's the only way we'll ever build the America we all know is possible, with real freedom, opportunity, and shared prosperity.... Will you make a monthly donation to get it going?

These messages sound like they came from a single organization, but in fact they were sent by True Majority (5/7/10 e-mail), Democracy for America (5/9/10 e-mail), and MoveOn (5/3/10 e-mail), respectively. This message style and tone was perfected by MoveOn, and quickly adopted by many organizations that needed to motivate people in absence of the social network connections that helped mobilize people in the pre-internet days (Snow et al. 1980). True Majority and Democracy for America both illustrated the “spillover effects” (Meyer and Whittier 1994) of MoveOn's model in the progressive movement.

True Majority was one of the first progressive organizations after MoveOn to use the internet for organizing. Started in 2002 by Ben Cohen, of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream, True Majority's central objective was to “increase America's investment in programs that benefit our children (like schools, health care, Head Start) by cutting Cold War weapons systems and shifting the savings” (TrueMajority.org 2010a). It focused more on international issues like world hunger and nuclear disarmament, but shared MoveOn's concern for clean energy, withdrawal of troops from Iraq, and other issues (TrueMajority.org 2010b). In short, True Majority used the web tools and e-mail style developed by MoveOn to pursue a distinct yet complimentary agenda.

The same could be said for Democracy for America (DFA), although its connection to MoveOn's model of activism was more direct. DFA evolved from Howard Dean's campaign

organization, Dean for America, which received hands-on assistance from Zack Exley, MoveOn's Organizing Director at the time (Exley 2008a). Like MoveOn, Democracy for America described itself as "a grassroots powerhouse working to change our country and the Democratic Party from the bottom-up" (DemocracyforAmerica.com 2010). It supported many of the same policies and candidates as MoveOn, and used tactics pioneered by MoveOn, including e-mail petitions and online fundraising. The organization distinguished itself from MoveOn by endorsing progressive candidates in non-national elections, providing online political training through its "DFA Night School" program, and facilitating true online community development among members through a blog and an open discussion forum (DemocracyforAmerica.com 2010). These unique attributes made Democracy for America distinct from other leading online progressive groups, and allowed it to carve out a niche among netroots activists that was not already filled by MoveOn.

Other groups adapted MoveOn's model to serve populations that were previously underrepresented in online political organizing. The first such group was a "spin-off" (McAdam 1995) organization called ColorofChange.org, which was co-founded by James Rucker, MoveOn's former Director of Grassroots Mobilization. ColorofChange.org formed in 2005 in response to the Bush administration's failure to respond quickly and effectively to the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans. It adapted MoveOn's basic "tactical repertoire" (Taylor, Rupp, and Gamson 2004; Tilly 1979), or set of tools and approaches to activism, to address instances of racial discrimination and intolerance. ColorofChange.org used petitions, calls, rallies, and other tactics to bring attention to racist comments made by commentators on Fox News Channel, voter suppression in black neighborhoods during the 2006 election, and the arrest of six black teens in Jena, Louisiana, who it alleged were being treated harshly because of their race

(ColorofChange.org 2010).

A second spin-off organization, MomsRising.org, was co-founded by MoveOn co-founder Joan Blades in 2006. It was designed to represent the concerns of mothers of all political stripes, and focused on issues like paid maternity leave, equal wages for women, and funding for after-school programs (MomsRising.org 2010a). MomsRising.org's e-mails and tactics were almost exactly the same as MoveOn's, but the organization developed new tactics as well. One innovation was its "Power of ONEsie" campaign, in which members decorated "onesies" (one-piece garments for babies) and mailed them to MomsRising.org, which hung them as a colorful and symbolic backdrop during public events (MomsRising.org 2010b).

The national-level leader I interviewed said in its early days the organization essentially copied MoveOn's tactics and step-up approach to action requests:

We started with e-mails where people would take a very simple action, like sign a petition, send an e-mail,... and with each campaign we were building the base. It was very much like the MoveOn approach to organizing.... Very simple website, largely driven by e-mails. People could click on a link in an e-mail and land on a page where they were given the opportunity to act. Not a lot of deviation out of the box.

The founders did make some conscious decisions about how they wanted the organization to differ from MoveOn. Instead of using a decentralized model in which staff members were spread across the country, they "were very intentional about having people, at least for the most part, in a single location.... For me, the goal was to build a certain kind of team feel." Although they used MoveOn's e-mails as an example, they changed the tone and some of the phrasing of the messages to give them a "voice" that they felt would be better received by the organization's

members. These changes did not affect the underlying similarity in organizing philosophies shared by MoveOn and the organization. Like the leaders of state-level organizations I interviewed, the national-level representative shared admiration for MoveOn's service orientation to member mobilization:

What distinguishes movements like MoveOn and ours from a lot of existing advocacy groups is being fundamentally about serving the members. You do have a centralized decision-making structure,... but fundamentally we can only go where our members want to go.... So we act as the voice of our members, versus coming to the table with a preset agenda of issues and trying to find people who we can enlist to support our agenda.

This member-driven approach to organizing was perhaps MoveOn's biggest contribution to the progressive movement in the United States.

MoveOn's Model Outside of the United States

MoveOn's model even inspired the creation of online activist organizations outside of the United States. In 2005, two Australian graduates of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government who were inspired by MoveOn built a successful organization called GetUp. The organization portrayed itself as "an independent political movement to build a progressive Australia... [that] brings together like-minded people who want to bring participation back into our democracy" (GetUp.org.au 2010). It worked on some issues of concern to MoveOn, such as climate change and rights for same-sex couples, but understandably focused on Australian national issues like aboriginal rights and the closing of immigration detention centers (GetUp.org.au 2010). Early on, a MoveOn staff member named Ben Brandzel gave the founders tips on how to build their organization through e-mail outreach, and this influence was apparent in the style and structure

of GetUp's messages. In fact, like True Majority and Democracy for America, GetUp's messages read as though MoveOn's staff wrote them. Likewise, GetUp used MoveOn's tactical repertoire, including petitions, calls, public rallies, house parties, and advertisements.

At the international level, a group named Avaaz (which means "voice" in several languages) used MoveOn's model to organize over five million members on three continents. It was launched in January 2007 with the help of MoveOn's then-Executive Director, Eli Pariser, and six other activists from around the globe. Offering web pages in fourteen languages, Avaaz positioned itself as "a new global online advocacy community" that "empowers its members to take action on pressing issues of international concern" (Avaaz.org 2010a). As with GetUp, Avaaz's agenda overlapped with MoveOn's on global issues like climate change and environmental protection, but it also focused on issues outside of MoveOn's purview, like the child sex slave trade and human rights violations in Burma and Tibet (Avaaz.org 2010b). Avaaz was run entirely on member donations, and developed its agenda on the basis of member feedback, just like MoveOn. Like the other online progressive organizations, Avaaz adapted MoveOn's tactics, rhetoric, and organizational model for slightly different purposes, but the family resemblance was undeniable.

A representative from an online activist organization based outside the United States said that the most important thing his organization learned from MoveOn was:

the very principle that people want to be engaged in politics in a different way, in way that is online, that is issue-oriented, not ideologically-oriented. And that that kind of movement can have tremendous power.

He also described how a MoveOn staff member showed organizational leaders how to construct e-mail messages following a formula involving two narratives: the "moment" narrative and the

“movement” narrative. The moment narrative described a crisis and an opportunity, which the organization’s staff jokingly referred to as the “crisitunity,” and provided a “theory of change” that explained to members what they could do and why it was important to act. The movement story contextualized the crisis and opportunity within the broader progressive movement:

We need to frame on a grander scale what’s going on. What are we doing?...

Where are we going? “If we join together, we have the power to change the way our very democracy works,” blah, blah, blah. It’s on a grander scale.

This message structure not only mimicked MoveOn’s e-mail style; it also perfectly encapsulated the processes of “diagnostic,” “prognostic,” and “motivational” framing that Snow and Benford (1988) described as critical elements of a movement’s ability to mobilize members. The “crisitunity,” for example, diagnosed the problem but also framed it as solvable, while the “theory of change” proposed an appropriate remedy and, along with the “movement” narrative, motivated members to act. Like state- and national-level progressive organizations, groups beyond America’s borders adapted MoveOn’s model for their own purposes while retaining the essential elements that made MoveOn’s model so influential in the first place.

Campaign Adaptations of MoveOn’s Model

National political campaigns also began integrating lessons learned from MoveOn into their strategies. Two campaigns stood out in this regard.

Referred to as “the opening salvo in a revolution” of citizen empowerment through technology, Howard Dean’s presidential campaign set the standard for how to run an internet-savvy national campaign (Trippi 2004:xviii). However, it is a grossly underreported fact that many of the innovations attributed to the Dean campaign actually came directly from MoveOn. Zack Exley, MoveOn’s Organizing Director, spent two weeks teaching Dean’s staff how to use

the internet to harness the campaign's grassroots energy. The campaign was already using Meetup.com, but Exley used MoveOn's existing event-planning tool as a model to create a program that allowed Dean supporters to post events on Dean's website and find nearby events using ZIP codes (Teachout 2008). He also explained how MoveOn's action requests adhered to a simple "1-2-3 action design," in which desired actions were prioritized (Mele 2008; Teachout 2008). If members signed a petition, for example, they would then be asked to forward it to friends and family, and later be asked to contribute money to support the campaign. Lastly, Exley taught Dean's staff to write short, punchy e-mails with an informal tone, frequent action links, a sense of urgency, and a personal signature at the bottom (Teachout and Streeter 2008). Reflecting later, Dean's former Director of Online Organizing said that MoveOn's help "transformed the way we thought about much of the internet campaign" (Teachout 2008:64).

By the time Barack Obama was running for president, many of the things that were innovative during Dean's campaign had "been absorbed and turned into orthodoxies" (Teachout and Streeter 2008:239). John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and all other contenders were using the internet to build their bases and raise millions of dollars. What the Obama campaign did so effectively was combine elements of Dean's campaign and MoveOn's get-out-the-vote programs with the candidate's personal knowledge of community organizing. From the beginning, David Plouffe, Obama's campaign manager, planned to rely heavily on internet-based organizing, so he hired a veteran of the Dean campaign to run the "New Media" wing of the operation. Like MoveOn, Obama for America kept metrics on every person who signed up online or at a campaign office, so they could track each volunteer's actions and adjust their e-mail messages accordingly. They also used a step-up approach to action requests much like MoveOn's "1-2-3 action design" to convert small donors into active volunteers (Exley 2008b; Plouffe 2009).

Obama's offline organizing was also clearly influenced by MoveOn. The "Neighbor to Neighbor" program, for example, combined elements of MoveOn's 2004 "Leave No Voter Behind" and 2006 "Call for Change" programs. Through Neighbor to Neighbor, Obama volunteers accessed lists of undecided voters in their neighborhoods to target, and input the outcomes of these contacts into a database, similar to the 2004 "Leave No Voter Behind" program. Volunteers in non-battleground states were also provided with lists of voters in battleground states to call using an online system that allowed them to make calls anytime from anywhere, just like MoveOn's "liquid phone banking" program in 2006 (MoveOn.org 2006; Walls 2008). The campaign also provided supporters with an online event-organizing tool, and its field program was structured similarly to MoveOn's council system, with volunteers filling various "coordinator" roles within neighborhood-based teams that were overseen by a field organizer (Quinn 2008). MoveOn's organizing tools and e-mail outreach system perfectly complimented the grassroots philosophy of the campaign, which was inspired by Obama's experience with community organizing. This confluence of desire for internet-driven grassroots organizing and availability of the MoveOn model ultimately helped Obama win the presidency, perhaps more than any work MoveOn did on Obama's behalf.

CONSERVATIVE ORGANIZATIONS MODELED AFTER MOVEON

Progressives and Democrats were not the only ones using MoveOn's model. In fact, several conservative groups explicitly portrayed themselves as "the MoveOn for the right" (Allen 2007; Harkinson 2007). These groups tried to replicate MoveOn's online fundraising and some of its tactics, but they usually were usually run by a few well-financed, entrenched Republicans instead of a group of political outsiders relying on members' financial support.

One of the first conservative online organizations that formed in direct response to

MoveOn was RightMarch.com. It was founded in 2003, shortly after MoveOn helped organize a “Virtual March on Washington” to protest the invasion of Iraq. Saying that he wanted to lead the “Virtual March from the Right,” organizational leader and conservative activist Dr. William Greene founded RightMarch.com “to counter the well-financed antics of radical left-wing groups like MoveOn.org by appealing to the grassroots ‘silent majority’” (RightMarch.com 2010). Like MoveOn, RightMarch.com used e-mail to spread its message and mobilize members, but its rhetoric was much more strident. For example, a message regarding Arizona’s immigration law, which allowed law enforcement agents to ask anybody they deemed suspicious to prove they were in the country legally, read as follows:

ALERT: You know, it’s bad enough that, President Barack Hussein Obama is trying to **SUE Arizona to BLOCK their new law....** Now he’s standing side-by-side with the President of **MEXICO** in front of the **WHITE HOUSE....** And together, they stood there and **TRASHED ARIZONA’S AND AMERICA’S LAWS!** (RightMarch.com 5/21/10 e-mail).

Moreover, RightMarch.com charged between \$19 and \$99 to send faxes to members of Congress, something MoveOn has never done. RightMarch.com’s aggressive e-mail messages, costly lobbying tactics, and one-man leadership structure meant that it functioned more as a vehicle for Dr. Greene’s conservative philosophy than as a genuine grassroots online activist group.

Another group that formed in 2003 was much closer in both tone and tactics to MoveOn. GrassfireNation was “a million-strong network of grassroots conservatives who are fighting to defend our liberty and freedom” by advocating for “border security” and “traditional marriage,” and against health care reform and “cap and tax” legislation to control carbon emissions

(Grassfire.com 2010a). Unlike RightMarch.com, GrassfireNation's e-mails struck a similar tone to MoveOn's: urgent, yet informal and not overly alarmist. One e-mail, for example, asked members to "join over 349,000 citizens who have signed the petition opposing the Cap and Tax bill," and signed off with "Your friends at GrassfireNation" (Grassfire.com 5/18/10 e-mail). This organization also did not charge to send petitions to Congress, although it occasionally marketed conservative books through its e-mail list. Like RightMarch.com, though, GrassfireNation was run by one man, Steve Elliot, a conservative internet communications specialist (Grassfire.com 2010b). Although it did not appear to be a one-man crusade against Obama the way RightMarch.com did, the fact that the organization's agenda was controlled by one man distinguished it from MoveOn, which frequently polled members to create its agenda.

Two other organizations that claimed to be the conservative answers to MoveOn began with much fanfare but did not live up to the hype. Both FreedomsWatch and TheVanguard emerged in 2007, in the wake of the Republicans' loss of both house of Congress in 2006. A cadre of wealthy conservatives launched FreedomsWatch as a "permanent political presence to do battle with the radical special interest groups and their left-wing allies in government" (FreedomsWatch.org 2008). Although it claimed on its website that it was not beholden to any one person or group, FreedomsWatch depended upon donations made by Sheldon Adelson, chief executive of the Sands casino corporation. When he failed to support a plan or disagreed with the organization's leadership, the group could not act (Luo 2008). As a result, after an initial \$15 million ad campaign supporting President Bush's requests for more war funding in 2007, the group folded. TheVanguard was created by founder of PayPal and religious conservative, Rod D. Martin, to "enable a level of conservative activism—both online and offline—previously achieved only by MoveOn.org and Obama for America" (TheVanguard.org 2010). Although

Martin attempted to mimic MoveOn's online organizing model, the organization's strategy was driven by a board of conservative activists and former Republican insiders (Dube 2007). It got some press for supporting an investigation into allegations of illegal contributions to Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign (Moore 2009), but since that time it has not taken action on major issues like health care reform, illegal immigration, or economic stimulus.

Ironically, despite multiple attempts to create a conservative MoveOn, the one organization I analyzed that seemed capable of mounting a credible grassroots conservative challenge was the Tea Party Patriots (TPP), a group that did not appear to be based on MoveOn's model. TPP was one of the leading organizations in the Tea Party movement, a loose coalition of individuals and groups that supported "the principles of fiscal responsibility, constitutionally limited government, and free markets" (TeaPartyPatriots.org 2010). After only one year in existence, TPP had organized over 1,000 community-based Tea Party groups, and claimed nearly 100,000 members (whom it called "patriots"). The organization positioned itself as a non-partisan grassroots organization dedicated to empowering "concerned average Americans" to stand up to their federal government (TeaPartyPatriots.org 2010). According to its website, TPP shared a basic organizing philosophy with MoveOn, including a fundraising model based entirely on individual donations and a firm belief that its members, not the organization, were the center of the movement (TeaPartyPatriots.org 2010). Indeed, several political commentators compared the TPP to MoveOn in its early days (Dorell 2009; Martin 2010).

The key difference between TPP and MoveOn was that the former organization used the internet as a tool for getting people organized at the local level, not as a platform for activism in its own right. Its website was not full of requests for members to sign petitions or call Congress; instead, the home page was full of links to community-based Tea Party groups in every state.

This focus on local, face-to-face organizing was also reflected in its use of e-mail. Rather than using e-mail as a tool for activism, TPP used its e-mail list to update members about upcoming Tea Party events and provide links to Tea Party social networking sites. A message from May 13, 2010, for example, included notices about an activist training in Arizona, a convention in Tennessee, a demonstration in favor of Arizona's recent immigration law (which gave police the right to ask anyone they deemed suspicious of illegal immigration to provide proof of legal residence), and two speaking events by conservative leaders (TeaPartyPatriots.org 5/13/10 e-mail). In some ways this was similar to MoveOn's council system, but TPP seemed more concerned with establishing community bonds at the local level. TPP's model represented a shift back toward the traditional community models that Putnam (2000) and Skocpol (2003) argued were better for creating long-lasting social networks and strong communities.

Although it is too early to say whether TPP's approach will be successful in the long run, it is currently one of the most viable conservative challengers to MoveOn and the progressive movement. In the 2010 election, Republicans gained 63 House and 6 Senate seats (Wikipedia 2010b, c). TPP did not formally endorse any candidates, but other organizations affiliated with the broader Tea Party movement endorsed 129 House and 9 Senate candidates, all of whom were Republican (Zernike 2010). Of the congressional seats won by Republicans in 2010, 40 House and 5 Senate seats were taken by candidates who either self-identified as Tea Partiers or were endorsed by one or more Tea Party organizations (Moe 2010). Together, these organizations may develop a powerful conservative netroots movement that uses some insights from MoveOn's model but also creates new organizational structures that mix online and offline activism in ways that resonate with Tea Party supporters.

CONCLUSION

As my analysis showed, success can be measured in many ways, and is often difficult to define. This was especially true for MoveOn because of the nature of the arenas in which it attempts to gain influence. It experienced some success in the realms of policy and elections, but public opinion and other features of the political opportunity structure in which MoveOn operated influenced the outcomes of these contests (Diani 1996; King and Husting 2003; Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995; McAdam 1999). MoveOn success in inserting its issue messages into media narratives was less ambiguous. Perhaps most striking, though, was the undeniable influence of MoveOn's model upon political organizing across the ideological spectrum. I address the greater significance of these effects in the next, final chapter.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

In previous chapters, I described how MoveOn attempted to influence national politics and maintain a positive public image while mobilizing both old and new progressive activists for online and offline activism. I examined the construction and experience of community in MoveOn, the effects of participation upon members' senses of self, the contest to frame MoveOn's organizational identity, MoveOn's staging and scripting of offline protest events, and its attempts to influence national politics and public opinion. This study is the first ethnographic examination of MoveOn, and as such, it provides an insider's perspective on the structures, strategies, and experiences that lay below the surface of internet-based political activist organizations. It advances scholarly understanding of online activism by shedding light on how activists move "from the seats to the streets," and by uncovering the consequences of their activism. In this chapter, I explore the conceptual significance of the data presented in each preceding chapter, and then turn to a broader theoretical discussion of these concepts.

COMMUNITY IN AN ONLINE ACTIVIST ORGANIZATION

In the absence of face-to-face social networks that are usually the foundations of activist communities (McAdam 1986; Nepstad 2004; Snow et al. 1980), MoveOn rhetorically constructed an image of community for online members. It also provided opportunities for offline collective action, but factors inherent to MoveOn's communication structure and strategy prevented the formation of long-lasting bonds among participants.

Manufactured Community

MoveOn used its top-down e-mail system to create a sense of community among members who were geographically dispersed and often acting in isolation from one another. It

created an image of community by vilifying opponents, defining the boundaries of its own identity, emphasizing the notion of “membership,” and making members feel both individually and collectively efficacious. Ultimately, these efforts were designed to motivate members for political activism. This model of community construction has important implications for scholarly understanding of community as a social construct, especially in the context of internet-based community formation.

Anderson (1983:6) asserted, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.” By saying that communities were imagined, Anderson did not intend to imply that people who believed they were members of a community were suffering from a type of false consciousness. Rather, he was pointing out that community is not only a product of physical co-presence, but is largely a matter of perceived commonalities. As Willson argued, this “mental/cultural construction binds people through generating a feeling of their belonging together even when the majority of the members of that community may never meet or know each other” (2006:25). In Anderson’s formulation, imagined communities became possible after mass production of literature written in vernacular languages allowed the development of a common knowledge base, leading to a sense of shared nationality. Even though the people reading this literature may have been quite different from one another in many respects, Willson noted that “what holds community together is the *perception* of commonality/similarity” (2006:32).

Today, people rely upon the internet (as well as the television) to provide easily understandable representations of a common “reality” that create feelings of belonging. Moreover, Western nations (and, increasingly, developing countries) have shifted from an industrial capitalist model of production to a service economy oriented toward consumption.

This consumer orientation fundamentally affects all aspects of the social world, creating a social system wherein individuals seek products, organizations, and even relationships with an eye toward how these will fulfill their perceived needs. Especially with the rise of internet communities, people can “shop around” for like-minded others, and supplement (if not entirely replace) offline relationships with online communities (Wellman et al. 1996). These online communities provide members with a sense of belonging, and can be as personally fulfilling as offline communities (Gochenour 2006; Horrigan and Rainie 2001; Scott and Johnson 2005; Wellman et al. 2003). However, because of the consumer orientation and physical isolation of participants, online communities are less likely to foster committed, caring relationships among people with heterogeneous interests or backgrounds (Fernback 2007; Wellman 2001; Wellman et al. 2001).

My analysis of MoveOn confirms Anderson’s (1983) hypothesis that community is as much a perception as an experience, and need not be limited to social interactions based on physical co-presence. Moreover, it affirms that the internet fosters development of communities of interest, especially among people who may feel marginalized in their political or cultural context. As several MoveOn members noted, during the Bush era MoveOn’s e-mails provided them with a comforting sense of belonging when they felt like they could not openly express their progressive political views. By providing members with a sense of power in numbers, MoveOn also empowered members to actively oppose the policies of the Bush administration and the conservative movement in general.

Although MoveOn was able to create a sense of community among members, it did so in a way that differentiated it from other online communities. In most online communities, people create social bonds by communicating with one another. This ability to participate in the

definition and reproduction of the community makes members both consumers *and* producers of community. In MoveOn, though, members' capacity to produce community was hindered by the structure of its e-mail system, which did not facilitate horizontal communication between members. As a result, MoveOn faced a dilemma: it needed to create a sense of community among members to maintain their commitment to the organization and increase their likelihood of participation, but its top-down e-mail system prevented members from creating social networks that would help maintain their commitment. To solve this dilemma, MoveOn used its top-down system to rhetorically construct an image of community, and encouraged members to "consume" this image of community. Unlike other online communities, MoveOn members were not involved in the construction of this community; they were free only to accept or reject the image produced by MoveOn.

In short, MoveOn offered members a *manufactured community*. A manufactured community is designed by a controlling body, rather than co-created by those who are supposed to be its inhabitants. It is consciously constructed for a particular instrumental purpose, and is not designed to serve the emotional needs of members, although it may provide some incidental emotional benefits. It is a top-down rhetorical formulation, not an emergent grassroots construct. Its location is in the words of those who control its formulation, not in the lived experiences or even the minds of those it claims to represent.

The concept of manufactured community expands upon Anderson's "imagined community" by showing how information technologies are no longer simply being used to convey ideas that—if widely accepted—can foster development of imagined communities. Now, organizations like MoveOn are using such technologies to market images of community itself. Just as the development of imagined communities occurred in the economic context of industrial

mass production, manufactured community is an outgrowth of its economic and cultural context. As the United States and other developed nations become increasingly oriented toward consumption instead of production, this “cultural logic” (Jameson 1991) shapes all aspects of society, including activism and the development of community. Moreover, the rise of technologies that break down spatial and temporal barriers to communication opened the door for many new types of communities. Some—perhaps most—are sustained through interpersonal communication, but others—like MoveOn—use this communication framework as a direct marketing tool for the manufacture of community.

Ephemeral Community

To say that MoveOn manufactured an image of community for consumption by members is not to imply that members did not experience a sense of community, or—if they did—that this experience was based on a falsehood. In fact, many MoveOn members reported feeling a sense of community, although some rejected the idea outright. Some members felt connected to an imagined community that they described as existing “out there,” in the ether of cyberspace. Others experienced community more directly, through participation in offline events. This sense of community was fleeting, though; once members were no longer participating in events or as members of their local council groups, they lost their sense of belonging to a community. MoveOn’s offline social networks did not facilitate the development of long-term community ties.

To some extent, the ephemerality of this community experience seems to confirm Putnam’s (2000) argument that the internet (and television) inhibited community formation and caused “civic disengagement” by preventing social interactions that could lead to bonding and bridging social capital. Likewise, Skocpol pointed out that the development of professional

advocacy organizations that treated members “not as fellow citizens but as consumers with policy preferences” decreased citizens’ need or desire to establish civically active community groups (2003:211). Both Putnam (2000) and Skocpol (2003) showed convincingly that strong feelings of loyalty and reciprocity developed most readily in groups in which members frequently met face-to-face. Indeed, the most active members of MoveOn’s council system expressed strong positive feelings about the people they met while participating, and were the most likely of my interviewees to say they felt like they belonged to a community. However, even MoveOn members who were not frequent participants in offline events often described a sense of belonging to a community “out there” that was defined by assumed similarities in political values and participation in the same political actions—such as e-petition signing—despite lack of physical co-presence. This fact challenges Putnam and Skocpol’s arguments because it shows that civic engagement and a sense of community *can* develop even when members lack the basic ability to communicate with one another.

Moreover, members who participated in a moderate amount of offline action reported experiencing almost instant rapport and camaraderie with other members at these events. Yet when they were inactive, this strong emotional experience did not translate into an enduring sense of belonging. This seemingly contradictory set of experiences resulted from the nature of MoveOn’s rhetoric, goals, and strategy. Because MoveOn rhetorically constructed an image of community in its e-mails, MoveOn members began to imagine a population of other people just like them that existed “out there,” like a cloud of water vapor. MoveOn’s offline events were opportunities for this cloud to condense and crystallize for a short time. Members entered these events with pre-established expectations about other members’ personalities and political values. These positive cognitive frames primed them to perceive other members as comrades, and they

acted in ways that confirmed these frames. By acting as though they were all part of a tight-knit community, MoveOn members manifested such a community experience, at least for a moment.

However, these events were not designed to establish lasting connections. They were explicitly oriented toward MoveOn's political goals, and were often quite short (one to two hours). Like Adler and Adler's (1999) transient resort workers or Gardner's (2004) bluegrass festivalgoers, MoveOn members experienced strong feelings of solidarity while engaged in these temporary social environments. This accelerated social bonding was counterbalanced by the short and infrequent opportunities members had to interact, the absence of online communication tools with which they could build upon offline connections, and the goal-oriented nature of the events. MoveOn ultimately needed to mobilize members for political action, and the manufactured image of community was important as a means to this end. It used its e-mail system to aggregate members' individual contributions, not to facilitate congregation. To the extent that they bought into this image of community and participated in offline action, members were able to establish *ephemeral communities* that thrived momentarily but evaporated after each event.

ACTIVIST IDENTITY AND THE VALUE IDENTITY ACTIVATION PROCESS

MoveOn members came to the organization from a variety of backgrounds. "Newcomers" got politically involved for the first time through MoveOn, while "veterans" had extensive activist histories that they extended by working with MoveOn. Through their participation in MoveOn, these two groups either developed or reinforced activist identities. This identity development and reinforcement was enabled by members' abilities to engage in value-oriented actions through the roles they fulfilled in MoveOn. The connection of values and roles to identities was mediated by competing role demands and emotional responses to events. In

turn, these factors affected the salience of identities and perceptions of opportunities for identity reinforcement. I refer to this complex relationship between values, roles, and identity as the *value activation process*.

The value activation process involves five elements. These elements are roughly chronological, but they also overlap and feedback upon one another. First, two *precipitating factors* make people predisposed to acting on their values. One factor shared by newcomers and veterans in my study was a generalized participatory worldview. According to this worldview, it is not enough to simply believe in a set of values; one must also be willing to act on these values. A participatory worldview is particularly likely to develop in response to witnessing influential others—such as parents or peers—engaging in discussions or actions related to social or political issues. This behavior models for witnesses the importance of being socially aware and active. A participatory worldview does not have to be oriented toward politics; it may motivate people to become active in many forms of social or political activity. Such a worldview is likely to lead to political activism when the participatory behavior witnessed is political in nature, and/or when government actions upset people and politicize their participatory worldview. Previous experience acting on one's values is a second precipitating factor. Prior participation in activism is an important predictor of activist involvement later in life (Downton and Wehr 1998; McAdam 1989; Whalen and Flacks 1989). This experience reinforces participants' values, provides roles in a network or organization with which they begin to identify, and fosters positive emotions like hope when the actions in which they are participating are successful (Reed 2004).

In reality, though, values are not automatically translated into action. The shift from values to value-oriented action is affected by two *mediating factors*: perceived opportunity and urgency. Family responsibilities, jobs, and other factors make some people “biographically

unavailable” (McAdam 1986) for certain types of participation, despite their participatory worldviews. These people face competing role demands that place limits on the time and energy they can commit to value-oriented actions like activism. When other role-based identities are more salient to their senses of self, they will curtail their activism and perceive this strain as a lack of opportunity. People who do not face as many competing role obligations, such as retirees or students, may nevertheless remain uninvolved due to a perceived lack of urgency. Some MoveOn members, for example, were not involved in activism until their sense of urgency was awakened by the “moral shock” (Jasper 1997, 1998) of the Bush administration’s post-9/11 restriction of civil liberties and invasion of Iraq. Moral shocks make activism seem more urgent, and can increase the salience of an activist identity. This shift in priorities can also convince previously inactive people to get involved, and can shape perceptions of opportunity as well. Thus, the decision to engage in activism is mediated by role demands and emotional responses that shape perceptions of opportunity and urgency, and affect the saliency of activist identity for those who already have such an identity.

If they perceive sufficient opportunity and urgency, people will seek roles that enable them to engage in *value enactment*. In value enactment, people take on roles in which they can act in ways that support their values. For some people, participation in a single value-oriented organization, like a social movement group, fulfills their desire for value enactment; others may achieve fulfillment by participating in multiple groups. Moreover, absolute levels of participation are less important than how current levels compare to previous experiences of engaging in value-oriented action. Some MoveOn members who had never before engaged in activism, for example, perceived online activism as a great opportunity for value enactment, while experienced activists either participated heavily in MoveOn or supplemented this participation

with other activism in order to feel they were sufficiently enacting their values. The key to value enactment is that people feel that the roles they fulfill give them sufficient opportunities to engage in actions that align with and reinforce their values.

The roles participants fulfill not only give them opportunities to act in accordance with their values; they also provide the context within which participants can engage in *value identity performance*. Through continued performance of roles that support their values, people begin to develop value identities. The evaluations of others are also an important part of this process (Cooley 1902; Goffman 1959; Mead [1934] 1962). Both newcomers and veterans reported that being treated or labeled as an activist by others gave them a sense of pride and reinforced their participation. By making their values visible through role performances, participants signify to themselves and others that their value identities are salient to their self-concepts (Gecas 1982, 2000).

As Stryker (1968, 1980) suggested and the behavior of veterans in MoveOn and other experienced activists showed, people seek roles that reinforce their highly salient identities (Downton and Wehr 1998; McAdam 1989; Whalen and Flacks 1989). This process of *identity reinforcement* is the final element of the value activation process. In general, once people develop value identities they will maintain or even increase their value-oriented activity to “feed” this salient identity. However, decisions regarding the performance of identity-reinforcing roles are once again mediated by perceived opportunity and urgency. Some people are prevented by competing role demands or a loss of urgency from engaging in value-oriented action as fully as would be expected given the salience of their value identities. On the other hand, continual value enactment will make value identities highly salient, thereby making it more likely that participants will maintain a sense of urgency and overcome competing role demands. Thus,

perceived opportunities and sufficient emotional investment are critical components in the process by which people's values are translated into action and, consequently, into identities.

The value activation process offers a cohesive account of how value identity—and more specifically, activist identity—is developed through the interplay of role enactment and value-oriented action. By explaining how values motivate people to seek out certain roles, it adds nuance to the structural symbolic interactionist claim that roles are the locus of identity development. In addition, by showing how fundamental values are to identities, this research helps explain why identities show continuity over time and across situations despite a lack of role continuity. My research revealed that many MoveOn members' activist identities persisted even during periods of inactivity, thus supporting Gecas's (2000) claim that value identities transcend roles and group affiliations. As Stryker (1968, 1980) proposed, MoveOn members generally sought roles that supported salient identities. I expand on Stryker's insight by revealing how this role-seeking behavior was mediated by perceptions of opportunity and urgency. People will not commit to roles if they do not perceive opportunities to act, even if these roles allow them to enact their values. Moreover, circumstances must exist that make such value-oriented action seem urgent.

This process also contributes to the study of identity in social movements. First, it brings attention to the importance of activist identity as a motivator for, and outcome of, movement participation. In addition, it specifies the processes by which this identity is developed and reinforced. This expands the scope of research on the relationship between identity and activism, which has focused overwhelmingly on identities based on social categories, not on activist identity in its own right (Armato and Marsiglio 2002; Bernstein 1997; Gamson 1995; Hunt and Benford 1994; Snow and McAdam 2000; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Second, the development

of activist identity among MoveOn members who engaged primarily or exclusively in online activism shows that activist identity can develop among less active social movement participants, as long as their current level of participation is high in comparison to previous levels of participation (or lack thereof) in such activities. This adds a new twist to research on how activist identity contributes to long-term commitment, which has focused on activists involved in movements based on face-to-face social networks, rigid ideologies, and/or high-risk protest tactics (Downton and Wehr 1998; McAdam 1989; Whalen and Flacks 1989).

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY FRAMING

MoveOn attempted to exert control over its organizational identity by projecting an image of itself as an influential progressive organization that was standing up for average Americans. This identity frame was then challenged or reinforced by ideologically motivated news sources, which engaged in “framing contests” (Ryan 1991) to shape public opinion of MoveOn. Members interpreted these competing claims through individual cognitive frames that were influenced by their activist experiences (both in and outside of MoveOn) and political values. Because MoveOn articulated an ambiguous identity frame, members and news sources alike interpreted its identity in ways that confirmed their ideological biases regarding the organization. This definitional ambiguity also encouraged MoveOn, progressive blogs, and members to reactively frame MoveOn’s identity on the basis of negative claims made by conservative news sources. This reactive identity framing process involved a kind of interpretive jujitsu, wherein opponent’s attacks were used to frame MoveOn in ways that contradicted the attackers’ original intent.

This analysis links concepts that are empirically related but often analyzed separately. Organizational identity, for example, has not traditionally been used in relation to social

movement organizations (but see Meyer 2004). Nonetheless, it proved to be a useful, more precise alternative to the concept of collective identity, which has been stretched to encompass conceptions of identity ranging from the individual to the cultural level (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Because organizational identity is defined through interactions between organizations, their members, and audiences (Brown et al. 2006; Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Hatch and Schultz 1997, 2002), it fits conceptually within the “identity framing” processes social movement organizations undertake in the context of “identity fields” populated by allies, opponents, and audiences (Hunt et al. 1994; Benford and Hunt 2003). My research extends this analysis by showing how ideologically motivated news sources also play important roles in identity framing. By focusing on how ideologically opposed news sources react to one another’s identity frames, my analysis adds nuance and depth to scholarly examinations of identity framing, which often portray “the media” as a monolithic, antagonistic force with which movements begrudgingly interact (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Gitlin 1980; Kruse 2001; Molotch 1988; Ryan 1991). Finally, by integrating framing processes occurring at the cultural, organizational, and individual levels, this study captures the complex interplay of cognitive and constructed frames more completely than existing approaches to identity framing.

The Consequences of Ambiguous Organizational Identity

My study of MoveOn also advances understanding of the consequences of definitional ambiguity in an organizational identity. Common wisdom among social movement scholars is that precisely—even strategically—defined identities are preferable because they give the organization more control over how it is perceived by outsiders, and allow insiders to understand how the organization’s goals align with their values (Bernstein 1997; Gamson 1996; Kiecolt 2000; Snow and McAdam 2000; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Whether they are internet-based or

traditional, political or apolitical, organizations usually explicate sets of orienting principles and goals that help members develop a clear understanding of the organization's identity (Hatch and Schultz 2004; Meyer 2004). Absent this information, members are left to their own devices in interpreting this identity. In such cases, members typically develop a shared sense of identity by communicating face-to-face (Hunt and Benford 1994; Hunt et al. 1994) or over the internet (Fox 2004; Pliskin and Romm 1997; Scott and Johnson 2005; Wellman and Gulia 1999). In MoveOn's case, though, both avenues for identity articulation were closed. When combined with its lack of a mission statement and the ambiguous meaning of identifying terms like "progressive" or "people-powered," this lack of inter-member communication networks should have hindered MoveOn's ability to control public perceptions and create solidarity among members, according to traditional thinking.

Indeed, MoveOn was frequently attacked by conservatives. These attacks may have damaged its reputation among the general public, although such conclusions cannot be drawn from my research. Regardless, the attacks increased members' senses of efficacy and provoked other progressive organizations (in this case, blogs) to act in solidarity with MoveOn. Thus, while the ambiguity of MoveOn's organizational identity made it easier for opponents to reframe it negatively, these attacks ultimately strengthened the organization.

By leaving key identifying terms such as "progressive" open for interpretation, MoveOn allowed members to read into these terms their own political values and perspectives on activism. For example, members who solely participated online and members who were leaders of their local councils *both* saw their participation as "grassroots" activism. The ambiguity reduced the likelihood of internal conflicts over MoveOn's identity by allowing multiple "true" interpretations to exist under the umbrella of "progressive," "people-powered" activism. This

challenges conventional wisdom about the necessity of articulating clear identity frames in all cases. It also suggests that ambiguous identity frames may be beneficial for multi-issue organizations like MoveOn. Members of such organizations are likely to have more diverse issue priorities than members of single-issue groups, and without an ambiguous identity that members can interpret to fit their perspectives, conflicts over organizational goals would likely increase. Ambiguous organizational identity may also be important to online activist organizations (especially those organizing on an international level) that aggregate the efforts of individuals who may come from diverse cultural backgrounds and might have little if any prior activist experience.

PROTEST AS DRAMA IN A MEDIA-SATURATED CULTURE

MoveOn's strategy was fundamentally shaped by an emphasis on media attention. The pace of its activism was determined to a great extent by the speed of the media cycle, and its protest events were designed with news values and routines in mind. To control the presentation of its messages and its public image, MoveOn carefully scripted members' actions and emotions. This dramaturgical control extended from the preparation of events all the way to post-event reports. Such top-down control over protest events also allowed MoveOn to respond rapidly to news events while they were still "hot," and thereby increased its chances of influencing media narratives about these issues.

Since Goffman (1959) first brought to light the dramaturgical nature of social interactions, researchers have applied this analytical approach to a wide variety of social settings. Dramaturgical analysis seems particularly applicable to social movements, but relatively few scholars have examined dramaturgy in social movements. Benford and Hunt (1992) analyzed how social movements scripted and staged protest events to portray themselves as powerful.

Snow (1979) and McAdam (1996) showed how movement organizations strategically adjusted their public presentations to prevent themselves from being perceived as marginal or dangerous. Finally, Kubal (1998) examined the difference between political claims made in back stage (interpersonal) and front stage (public) regions. My study adds to this relatively small body of work by revealing the communicative and interpersonal avenues through which activists' emotions and actions were dramaturgically controlled. It also shows that such dramaturgical control is exerted before, during, and even after protest events. Furthermore, it contextualizes these processes by connecting the performance of protest to the accelerating news cycle.

The acceleration of the news cycle is part of a larger trend in what Harvey (1989) called “time-space compression,” in which new communication technologies have allowed for nearly instantaneous mutual experiences across vast geographical distances. This trend has opened up new avenues for political mobilization on a global scale using the internet (Rodgers 2003; Routledge 2000, 2003). On the other hand, it has caused social movements to feel the need to repackage their claims into sound bites to receive attention in a social world where people are preoccupied with immediate events and their attention is fragmented by multiple simultaneous demands (Gamson et al. 1992; Gergen 1991). Movements adjust to these social circumstances by accelerating their claims-making and focusing on short-term “campaigns” instead of long-term goals, even though the actual political processes that movements hope to influence—particularly legislative decision making—still occur on a much slower time scale (Rorty 1995; Rosa 2003).

Movement organizations' reliance upon dramatic protest tactics and succinct issue frames makes sense within this larger cultural context. The careful scripting and staging of protest events is a virtual requirement in an age where social movements must break through a wall of incessant information and spectacle to get their messages across. Essentially, protest events like

the “media events” planned by MoveOn are advertisements. The choreographed actions and emotional expressions by participants are designed to convey easily understandable symbolic images to audiences, while the carefully worded and professionally produced signs function as tag lines for the “product,” which in this case is a political idea. As politicians have moved toward a marketing model of campaigning over the past fifty years (McGinniss 1969; Scammell 2007), so too have social movement organizations increasingly shifted toward an emphasis on visuals and message control through both paid and earned media. A marketing approach to the analysis of protest unifies insights from the social movement literature on framing (Gamson and Modgilani 1989; Hunt et al. 1994; Snow et al. 1986), tactics (McAdam 1983; Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1979), and movement-media dynamics (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Gitlin 1980; Ryan 1991) into a single dramaturgical analysis of movements’ strategic attempts to shape public opinion through media-oriented tactical repertoires.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT OUTCOMES

MoveOn is broadly considered to be one of the leading and most powerful progressive organizations in the United States. However, with only one exception (Middleton and Green 2008), no empirical research has been conducted to verify or refute these claims. My study is the first to systematically analyze MoveOn’s influence upon policies, elections, media narratives, and models of online political organizing. It provides new insight into the goals, strategies, structures, and potential influence of online activist organizations.

Political Influence as Mediated Opportunity

MoveOn mobilized members online and offline for symbolic actions, lobbying, donations, and volunteer work to influence policies and elections. It met with some success in this regard, at least in terms of correlations between its goals and final outcomes. However,

MoveOn's individual influences upon policies and elections were unclear because of the confounding involvement of other organizations and shifts in public opinion. These results offer support to both political opportunity and political mediation models of movements' political influence.

Political opportunity theory suggests that the likelihood of success for "challengers" like social movement organizations is directly tied to the "openness" of the political system, as measured by ability to participate in the political system, access to political decision making processes, absence of government repression, and the presence of movement allies in positions of political power (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1978). More recently, scholars have expanded the concept of political opportunity to include factors in the "opportunity environment," such as cultural attitudes and public opinion, that also affect the likelihood of protest, the selection of tactics, and a movement's chances of success (Diani 1996; King and Husting 2003; Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995). Political mediation theory is related to the study of political opportunity, but it places more emphasis on the relationship between a movement and institutional actors, such as elected political leaders (Amenta and Caren 2004; Amenta et al. 2010). It proposes that movements are more likely to be successful when they "engage in collective action that changes the calculations of relevant institutional political actors...[such that they] see a challenger as potentially facilitating or disrupting their goals" (Amenta, Halfmann, and Young 1999). In other words, political leaders must believe it is worth their efforts (in terms of political capital or votes, for example) before they will advocate for a movement's position. The movement's success is "mediated" by this support, and thus it indirectly influences political outcomes.

MoveOn's choice of tactics was undeniably influenced by the relative openness of the political system in the United States. Its decision to rely upon non-confrontational tactics like

lobbying of representatives, election of sympathetic leaders, and peaceful public rallies showed that MoveOn was confident that a reform-oriented approach would lead to meaningful changes. Prior to 2007 (when the Democrats took control of Congress), MoveOn had difficulty achieving gains because the Bush administration and Republican-controlled Congress closed off its opportunities for meaningful access to decision makers. Moreover, until 2006 public opinion still favored Bush and the Republicans. This made it hard for MoveOn to convince elected leaders and candidates to openly oppose the Iraq War and other issues, because these people did not see the advantage of doing so. In short, during the majority of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the political opportunity structure *and* the “opportunity environment” were relatively closed to MoveOn’s challenges, making a political mediation strategy untenable. This lack of opportunity harmed MoveOn’s political effectiveness, but it also allowed the organization to recruit literally millions of people who felt that protest was the only option in a hostile political environment. This upsurge in membership and protest supports Kitschelt’s (1986) hypothesis that protest is most likely to occur when a political system is partially closed.

MoveOn faced a different situation after 2006 and especially after Obama became president in 2008. Under a Democratically-controlled Congress and sympathetic president, MoveOn had greater legitimacy in the eyes of those in power. In many cases, it had helped these people get elected, and therefore was able to place a certain amount of pressure on the president and Democrats in Congress to “mediate” its agenda by proposing legislation that was in line with its goals. In addition, MoveOn profited from a “throw the bums out” mentality in 2006 and 2008, which made the public more receptive to its claims. During the four-year period between 2006 and 2010, the political opportunity structure and its accompanying opportunity environment both opened up to progressive political ideas, in part because of MoveOn’s efforts to elect progressive

leaders and shape public opinion. In this context, MoveOn was able to achieve moderate success in its policy and election work (as shown in Chapter Eight). Although the opportunity structure was more favorable during this period, MoveOn's newfound legitimacy challenged its credibility as an "outsider" organization. For some members—in many cases, those who had been most active—MoveOn's connection to so many Democrats undermined its moral position. Thus, paradoxically, MoveOn experienced political success and a loss of "outsider" credibility as it tried to navigate the middle ground of being a pragmatic progressive organization in a two-party representative democracy.

Institutional Isomorphism in Internet Activist Organizations

MoveOn also influenced politics by developing a model of online political activism that was adapted to all levels of movement organizing. As an "early riser" in the online progressive movement, MoveOn was able to influence the underlying structure of online organizing in ways that later organizations could not (McAdam 1995). It created a model that integrated top-down strategic decision making with bottom-up agenda setting, and developed a decentralized, nimble organizing structure in which the necessity of quick action would not be hampered by unnecessary bureaucracy.

Through a process of "institutional isomorphism," MoveOn's model became the standard by which all other internet activist organizations were measured. Institutional isomorphism begins when an innovative organization creates a model that improves the performance of the tasks required by an institution (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). As the effectiveness of this model is proven through results, organizations within the same or related fields begin adopting the model. At some point, though, adoption of the model becomes less motivated by rational decisions about improved performance; instead, model adoption becomes

an expectation if an organization wishes to be perceived as legitimate. As the initial organization is exalted as the *only* legitimate model, the organizations in a given field (whether business or politics) become “isomorphic” with one another (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Evidence for institutional isomorphism abounds in my analysis of MoveOn’s effects upon other political organizations. For the first few years after its initial e-mail petition, MoveOn slowly developed a model that integrated online and offline activism, and received increasing press attention. Especially after the attacks of September 11th and during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, MoveOn proved that its approach to activism was effective at mobilizing large numbers of people and dollars. It also continued to innovate new internet-based tactics, such as the “virtual march” it organized in 2003. Its success inspired the creation of True Majority, Democracy for America, and other organizations.

These organization engaged in what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) called “mimetic isomorphism.” Mimetic isomorphism is more likely to occur in the midst of uncertainty about technologies, goals, or the surrounding environment in which organizations function. In such uncertain circumstances, organizations view the leading model as a safe choice, and simply copy it. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was great uncertainty about the social and political effects of the internet. In this context, the fact that MoveOn was able to show evidence of successfully using the internet for political mobilization made its model very attractive to people who wished to do the same. Added to this technological uncertainty were the political and cultural upheavals of the contentious 2000 presidential election, the terrorist attacks on September 11th, and the invasion of Iraq. These events made political mobilization seem more urgent to people on both sides of the political spectrum, and led to an explosion of interest in

MoveOn's model. It was no coincidence that True Majority, Democracy for America, RightMarch.com, and GrassfireNation all emerged between 2002 and 2004, when MoveOn was beginning to really take off. Likewise, after the sweeping Democratic victory in the congressional elections of 2006, conservatives were very worried about the increasing strength of the progressive netroots. As they both explicitly acknowledged, the founders of FreedomsWatch and TheVanguard mimicked MoveOn's model when developing their organizations in the wake of this election.

A second type of institutional isomorphism, "normative isomorphism," was also apparent in my analysis. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), normative isomorphism occurs when individuals entering an institutional field are trained by a handful of leading organizations or educational programs (such as prestigious business schools), such that they internalize the same basic set of norms and values. This socialization into a prescribed set of norms and values feeds isomorphism because leaders who emerge from this pool are likely to develop similar organizations, even if they do not do so consciously. In my research, normative isomorphism was most apparent in ColorofChange.org and MomsRising.org, two groups that "spun off" (McAdam 1995) from MoveOn. In these cases, the organizational structures and other organizational elements could be traced to training acquired through direct engagement with MoveOn. Further evidence for normative isomorphism appeared in ProgressNow, Democracy for America, GetUp, and Avaaz. Leaders of each of these organizations received direct assistance and training from MoveOn staff members in their early days. These staff members greatly influenced the norms and values that influenced leaders' decisions about organizational structures and perceptions of members.

Beyond these considerations, though, I found evidence for what I refer to as *rhetorical isomorphism*. My analysis revealed that isomorphic processes go deeper than organizational structures or even norms and values; in fact, the structure and usage of language also becomes isomorphic. As shown by the e-mails from both progressive and conservative organizations, the structure and tone of MoveOn's e-mail messages have proliferated among online political organizations. Indeed, the rhetorical structure of these e-mail messages—the framing of “moment” and “movement” narratives, as one leader explained—may be the aspect of MoveOn's model that has been most broadly mimicked. Snow and Benford (1992) suggested that the similarity in issue framing across multiple social movement organizations was due to the presence of a “master frame,” such as the “rights” master frame in the 1960s and 1970s. My analysis does not refute this point, but it adds another layer to potential explanations of this similarity in framing. I show how these similarities may also be due to mimetic processes occurring at the institutional level that ultimately affect the rhetorical structures underlying issue frames. Furthermore, I show how similar frames may also be partially explained by similarities in values and goals across social movement organizations that result from processes of normative isomorphism.

CONSUMING ACTIVISM

Underlying many of the processes I observed in MoveOn was a fundamental consumerist orientation to politics. Scholars examining the relationship of politics to consumption have typically focused on “political consumerism.” The basic premise of this research is that, in post-industrial consumer economies, the new location for political expression is the marketplace. By purchasing certain products—such as organic food (Klintman 2006)—consumers make political statements and encourage businesses to invest in these products (Holzer 2006; Stolle, Hooghe,

and Micheletti 2005). Analysts of political consumerism have examined the emergence of “lifestyle politics” based upon certain consumption patterns (Bennett 1998; Shah et al. 2007), boycotts of corporations that engage in inhumane or environmentally harmful practices (Jenkins and Perrow 1977; Kozinets and Handelman 2004), and “buycotts” that reward companies for humane or environmentally friendly practices (Balsiger 2010; Friedman 1996; Minton and Rose 1997). These studies are related to my analysis of MoveOn to the extent that they call attention to the importance of consumerism as both a tactic and target of current social movements. However, rather than focusing on how consumption can be political, or how activism may target certain aspects of consumerism, my study reveals how *activism is increasingly becoming a consumable product*.

Many members I interviewed were drawn to MoveOn because it gave them the ability to participate in activism quickly and without having to invest time researching the issues. One member explained that she liked MoveOn because it was a “one-stop shop” where she could “get all [her] progressive needs met in one place.” Members liked MoveOn’s online format because it facilitated convenient, point-and-click activism in which they could engage during lunch breaks, a child’s naptime, or any other moment of temporary freedom from competing demands. Like fast food, MoveOn’s online activism was successful not because it was necessarily the most “nutritious” (in terms of providing deep understanding of issues) but because it was cheap, fast, and convenient (Ritzer 1996). In fact, MoveOn explicitly positioned itself as a “service” organization that allowed “busy but concerned citizens” to participate in politics (MoveOn.org 2011). Like a fast food employee passing a pre-cooked meal through a drive-thru window, MoveOn delivered pre-packaged and easily digestible political messages to members who did not have the time—or would not set aside the time—to engage in other types of activism, but still

wanted to feel like they were doing something. This conscious orientation toward a consumer model of activism served the needs of busy people who otherwise may have been “biographically unavailable” (McAdam 1986) for activism due to the competing demands of family, work, or other responsibilities.

MoveOn’s offline activism also fulfilled members’ appetites, though in different ways. Unlike online activists, who liked MoveOn because it made activism quick and convenient, offline activists participated precisely because such activism required a greater commitment. A sense of sacrifice was central to offline activists’ definitions of activism, and by dedicating time and energy to MoveOn they were able to feel they had sacrificed for what they believed. More so than online activism, offline activism allowed members to act on their values, and thereby develop or reinforce activist identities. Whereas online activism—like fast food—fulfilled desires for convenience, offline activism produced feelings of accomplishment among participants that—to stick with the food metaphor—might be more akin to the experience of cooking a meal. MoveOn’s flexible, opt-in model of political organizing provided many possible levels of participation, and thereby served the needs of a variety of progressive activists.

By giving both online and offline activists the tools they needed to feel politically fulfilled, MoveOn facilitated “personalized politics,” which Lichterman (1996) described as a trend toward self-focused activist experiences. In personalized politics, activists prioritize fulfillment of their own value commitments over loyalty to fellow activists or a particular organization. MoveOn’s online tactics (petitions, donations, etc.) individualized collective action and gave members a sense of personal efficacy. Its offline events were also ultimately individualized in nature, given that the organization put little effort into facilitating long-term community bonds and often emphasized the personally empowering experience of participating

in such activism. Furthermore, the fact that some offline activists left MoveOn to pursue their value commitments through other organizations is also indicative of a personalized approach to politics. This “shopping around” behavior reflected a consumerist orientation to activism, in that these members viewed MoveOn as one of many purveyors of the product (activist experience) that they wished to consume in order to fulfill their personal value commitments.

Future research on social movements should more thoroughly examine how the tactics, frames, goals, and even the experiences of activists are fundamentally shaped by the economic and cultural context in which protest take place. In Western societies, movement organizations—and perhaps especially online activist organizations like MoveOn—have adapted to consumerism by manufacturing a consumable image of community, choreographing dramatic “advertisements” for their messages, and providing multiple styles and levels of activism to serve the needs of their “customers.” They have also acclimated to the acceleration of “time-space compression” (Harvey 1989) by pre-packaging both online and offline activism for rapid response to “hot” issues. These adaptations serve the needs of members and the news media, and move social movement organizations further toward their goals of influencing public opinion and politics.

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March 3, 2005. "Fight the Right Next Thursday Night! A Plan for Boulder."

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August 18, 2005. "The Vigils—All Across America."

August 23, 2005. "Come See What All the Buzz is About."

2006

March 16, 2006. "Iraq at Three: Pre-Emptive War Doesn't Work."

August 9, 2006. "Victory!"

August 15, 2006. "We Can Stop the Politics of Terror."

August 17, 2006. "Sen. Allen: Racism is Unacceptable."

September 7, 2006a. "You've Come Through Before—Help Host Our Big Action?"

September 7, 2006b. "Ready to Make History?"

October 15, 2006. "Today's the Day!"

November 2, 2006. "A Convenient Truth."

November 4, 2006. "America Needs Your Voice."

2007

January 30, 2007. "Stop Escalation: Reach Out to MoveOn Members in Key States."

July 3, 2007. "'Are You Kidding?'"

October 5, 2007. "We Stood Up for Our Kids' Health Care."

October 12, 2007. "Vigil in Boulder to Save Kids?"

December 14, 2007. "Congress is Listening on Iran, Thanks to You."

2008

February 2, 2008. "Help Obama Win."

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November 5, 2008. “VICTORY!”

2009

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October 27, 2009. “Big News.”

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December 1, 2009. “This is Wrong.”

2010

March 26, 2010. “Amazing.”

April 2, 2010. “Obama Says ‘Drill, Baby, Drill’?!?”

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RightMarch.com. 2010. "Obama Lets Mexican Prez TRASH Arizona's Law—FIGHT BACK!"
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APPENDIX: MEDIA MARKETS

Media Market	Market Rank	Newspaper(s) Analyzed	Avg. Weekly Circulation
New York, NY	1	<i>The New York Times</i>	928,000
Denver, CO	16	<i>The Denver Post</i>	341,000
Pittsburgh, PA	23	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette</i>	184,000
Columbus, OH	34	<i>Columbus Dispatch</i>	184,000
Albuquerque-Santa Fe, NM	44	<i>Albuquerque Journal</i> ; <i>Santa Fe New Mexican</i>	94,000 (AJ); 23,000 (SFNM)
Little Rock-Pine Bluff, AR	56	<i>Arkansas Democrat-Gazette</i>	169,000
Tulsa, OK	61	<i>Tulsa World</i>	102,000
Spokane, WA	75	<i>Spokesman-Review</i>	80,000
Madison, WI	85	<i>Capital Times</i> ; <i>Wisconsin State Journal</i>	26,000 (CT); 92,000 (WSJ)
El Paso, TX	98	<i>El Paso Times</i>	69,000
Lincoln-Hastings- Kearney, NE	105	<i>Lincoln Journal Star</i>	72,000
Augusta, GA	114	<i>Augusta Chronicle</i>	61,000
Monterey-Salinas, CA	124	<i>Monterey County Herald</i>	26,000
Bangor, ME	154	<i>Bangor Daily News</i>	53,000
Eureka, CA	195	<i>Eureka Times-Standard</i>	18,000