

Glen Tarman, Trade Justice Movement coordinator (and Make Poverty History coordination lead on new media in 2005), *June 2006*

Citizens taking action online and the role of politicians: some observations, practical notes and suggestions from a global poverty campaigner

The Global Call to Action Against Poverty is just one example of the new forms of international campaigns with national platforms (like *Make Poverty History* in the UK) connecting citizens calling for urgent action by politicians to address global problems. Our experience can be explored to improve the capacity of citizens to take action online (on global and other issues), the ways in which politicians respond, and how professional campaigners design the campaigns their supporters and target politicians engage with.

In civil society groups there is a growing recognition that we will not make poverty history, secure human rights internationally or protect the global environment without the effective and creative use of new media in our campaigning towards these ends.

Citizens express their support for such causes in a variety of ways including symbolic gestures (last year 8 million people in the UK wore a white band – the global symbol of the campaign to make poverty history) or through events such as demonstrations, marches and rallies or cultural manifestations (for example, the *Live8* concerts ahead of last year's G8 Summit in Gleneagles).



Involvement in large-scale single-issue campaigns is increasingly taking place online. In communicating with politicians in particular, whether in government or their local MP, citizens are using digital channels in greater numbers. In *Make Poverty History* in 2005 more citizens in the UK contacted politicians through email than by any other means.

For younger citizens, if they wish to actually communicate with a politician at all, doing so through a print communication or letter is something they may probably never do in their entire lifetime. *Make Poverty*

History shows that they will contact a politician through email in large numbers.

Professional campaigners are both generating and responding to a new media reality. They are facilitating communication between citizens and politicians; harnessing the power of new media proactively, but also simply working in a Europe where broadband access to the Internet is becoming ever more mainstream and undertaking everyday activities digitally is being normalised.

Alistair Campbell, UK Prime Minister's Tony Blair's former Director of Communications, recently called *Make Poverty History* "a brilliant example" of using new media for political engagement in campaigning. He said: "People felt this was a two-way dialogue. Political parties are still driven by 'one to many' communications, rather than trying to imagine - and bring about - 'one to one'."

Campbell sees the area most in need of development as how a genuine two-way process of debate and engagement can be developed: "The best of our MPs have picked up on this and developed really exciting ways of re-engaging with their constituents. But it is slow, and I think even the best would admit that pressure groups still lead the way. They do not always have the resources of the major parties but they make up for it with technological know how and entrepreneurial spirit."

Politicians, except a minority of thought leaders and practitioners, have not grasped what the digital age means for listening to the publics that voted them in and whose concerns they must respond to in public debates and in the development of policy and law. They largely appear ill equipped or supported through appropriate advice and tools to respond effectively.

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Increasing the efficacy of online action advocacy: emailing politicians

Debates about ICTs, campaigning and the democratic process are too often theoretically based. If we want to find answers to the question “how can citizens capacity to take action be improved with a concomitant increase in influence on formal political processes?” we need to find practical answers to the day-to-day challenges parliamentarians and professional campaigners face. We need to explore practice and find ways in which this can be improved to the benefit of concerned citizens, politicians and professional campaigners alike.

Evaluating e-campaigning and its effectiveness extends to both how campaigning organisations use new media (and associated ways of working) as well as their impact on the publics that receive the requests and take the actions. In addition, online activism programmes must also be considered and evaluated on the influence that the online action and advocacy tools/tactics had on decision makers and the impact they have on policy change.

Whilst complex, such evaluations are possible and need to be made if we are to develop practice for greater impact.

Online actions are mostly of generic types used widely in the global issues and other campaigning sectors in the UK and globally (particularly, but by no means exclusively, in North America and Europe). These include:

1. Requests to email government ministers responsible for the policy area
2. Requests to email members of Parliament (MPs)
3. Requests to sign up to petition or petition-like actions that will be used by coalitions and their members to support the campaign goals (e.g. by demonstrating size of public support)
4. Requests to take offline actions that aim to focus pressure on decision-makers

In the typologies above, 3. and 4. are secondary and 1. and 2. are primary (although may be mediated through an organisation i.e. not send direct by an individual to the decision-maker or MP).

In addition to metrics around actions that are digital forms of traditional letter writing, campaign coalitions and campaigning organisations launching online advocacy with the goal of generating citizen pressure on important decision makers (whether political leaders, government officials, MPs or others) need to explore what happens at the receiving end.

Generally, the common forms feature a call to action, a sample public email (online ‘letter’ text), a form for users to input their personally identifiable information and, sometimes, the ability to personalise the email sent.

There is an underlying assumption with these types of action that the largest number of subscribers taking more online actions and thereby generating more communications to targets achieves greater political impact.

Civil society campaigners should be undertaking a much more in depth analysis and understanding of the factors contributing to successful online actions. Measuring some aspects of the effectiveness of online action campaigns – the mechanics of open rates, response rates etc. – is becoming more widespread. However, it is much more difficult to measure the influence that email actions have in real world outcomes of policy discourse and change (and disaggregating this from other campaign activity).

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Much more effort should be spent attempting to measure the influence of online actions (alongside developing strategies to improve online campaigns and maximise their effectiveness in practical terms). To do so means looking at what works for all participants of the communication (campaign originator, sender, political target etc.).

The *Make Poverty History* experience showed that often a campaign originator or 'sponsor' of an email action had not considered the impact at the receiving end (let alone how the action would or could have the most impact). For example, logistically, there was often no thought as to prior contact with the recipient of a mass action in relation to managing the communication.

This often results in a poor 'user experience' for the sender as well as the recipient of the action. Some government departments are simply not up to the task and need to be encouraged to improve their systems. Other government departments are willing and able to service the emails and take the opportunity to deliver communications back to the sender in the name of the responsible politician.



Online campaigns alone are rarely enough to win. Coordinating email actions with offline tactics is often necessary. This relates, at the basic level, specifically to decision-makers who are not likely to actually receive or view the emails personally.

Make Poverty History made up for this with stunts and handovers. This included 'delivery' visits to 10 Downing Street with email print outs of messages to Tony Blair, EC trade commissioner Peter Mandelson receiving a 'You Have Mail' banner at the WTO meeting in Hong Kong, and Bono carrying a case with

CDs of emails for the G8 from the *Live8* audience. This kind of media and PR exercise adds to the visible public platform created from the email actions for politicians to act.

In addition to many government departments, most parliamentarians are not 'e-savvy' and lack understanding of digital communications. The situation is improving but not fast enough. This has implications about good practice. Online actions can have great impact. At one level this is the power of bringing citizens in touch with the policymakers, a two-way exchange of electors and those who represent them. But it can be much less than this.

All too often someone sending an email to a politician on an issue they care about receives no reply at all. This happened in *Make Poverty History* even when the political target was told in good time that they will receive emails from the public, what the content would be and offered them the opportunity to communicate back.

Research on *Make Poverty History* showed that the public wants to know that it is worth communicating with politicians. They want to know what happens to their emails. They want to politicians to act, but they also want to know simply that they have been heard.

In promoting communication with politicians, *Make Poverty History* was the way a great number of individuals took their first ever political action. Politicians may prefer that they do not receive the same email from large numbers of people, but they need to recognize that for many people who want to show they support a campaign this may be the only way, at least at first, that they will show they want a politician to act on that issue.

More informed members of the public will take advantage of options to personalise their email message based on their additional knowledge or research. In the *Make Poverty History* 'email army' (of which one list had over 500, 000 subscribers), there were significant numbers of activists that valued highly politicians engaging in email exchanges over detailed policy questions.

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Next steps

A review of good practice in mass email actions sent to politicians is long overdue. The above are just some of the considerations. Professional campaigners should be encouraged to explore in greater detail what best practice should look like in 2006 and beyond.

This should include:

- Consulting politicians and civil servants about where they, as recipients, believe such email communications could be more effective e.g. so that they are in a form that can be practically dealt with and can have better impact.
- Bringing together the wider experience of organisations that work on broader political campaigning and the Internet so this knowledge base can be meshed with that of the professional campaigners working on single-issue campaigns.
- Pulling together the mass of international experience from the US (where lawmakers and practitioners can often be seen to be more responsive to digital communications) for professional campaigners and politicians in Europe to learn from.
- Professional campaigners and politicians reaching out to activists and supporters/constituents to ask them more about their experiences in taking email actions in order to identify better ways to produce and respond to the sender.
- Producing recommendations and learning resources for the civil society campaigning organisations (not just their own organisation or sector) and parliamentarians, political parties, civil servants and government officials.

Such a systematic study would identify practical ways forward. Professional campaigners working on a large scale campaigns (especially those on global issues for major coalitions) as well as politicians and their parties would benefit from a resulting guide being produced. Every campaign is different and any guide should not dictate rules or standards, but a trusted body or partnership should be resourced to distill and set out good practice and learning from experiences in the last 10 years or so together.

There are so many simple ways that process and practice can be improved in email and campaigns. For example, campaign managers giving prior notice to targets can result in a dedicated email address enabling the emails not to become 'lost' in a general enquiry email inbox and a reply to be sent more quickly. Often prior notice also results in refreshed statements that are helpful to the progress of a campaign and ensure less delay in a reply being sent to a citizen.

There are many other examples where generic action processes can be improved, even modestly, to improve email actions. In the UK, campaigners often ask supporters to encourage their MPs to sign an Early Day Motion (EDM). EDMs allow MPs to put on record their opinion on an issue and canvass support for it, often backed by campaigns, from fellow parliamentarians (in effect, a kind of petition that MPs can sign). Many campaigns now have tools for online audiences to select their MP and send a request to sign an EDM. Often the sites do not even place a link to enable a citizen to see if their MP has already signed an EDM so that they can be thanked for doing so and a different next level request be generated. It is understandable that MPs would wish not to be asked to do something that they have already done. Going one step further, a tool could be created to automatically check whether an MP had taken a requested action.

Another simple method is for politicians to post a full reply on their website and for supporters to be directed to the reply to their message automatically by the politician, government department or the campaign group.