

# Environmental Activism and the Internet

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**Abstract:**

This paper examines the impact and potential of Internet-based technologies in the performance of important information and communication functions of grassroots environmental organizations. Anecdotally, it is clear that Internet-based technologies have enabled grassroots, locally-based environmental organizations to expand their abilities to access, use, create and disseminate information, and have served to empower marginalized segments of the population. However, there has not been any focused, empirical research to date to support these assertions. The current state of grassroots environmentalism and uses of the Internet by grassroots environmental organizations are reviewed and frameworks for further understanding the transformational impact of the Internet for grassroots activist organizations are presented. This paper ultimately serves as a call for systematic, empirical research to further understand the role of the Internet in the information functions of the grassroots-based environmental justice movement.

**Introduction:**

Environmental activist groups are successfully using the Internet and electronic communication technologies as mechanisms through which to access, use, create, and disseminate information. Internet-based technologies are impacting the information functions of grassroots activist movements as groups develop voices that expand their traditional social, political, and geographic boundaries. The intent of this paper is to examine the Internet as a communication and information dissemination tool for grassroots environmental activists, and to provide a review of the related literature, raise questions and issues for further study, and discuss frameworks for analysis of the Internet as an important tool through which grassroots environmental activists work toward social change. Although this discussion focuses on use of the Internet by grassroots environmental organizations, the points raised here apply to all grassroots movements for social change.

**Citizen movements and information:**

Historically, citizen movements have been formed as responses to the perceived lack of accountability by existing power structures in dealing with specific issues that the citizenry deems important. In challenging the status quo, the collecting and disseminating of information in support of the citizen

group's cause becomes its important and central function. Henderson (1974, p.34) suggests, "the rise of new participatory citizen movements for consumer and environmental protection, peace and social justice are grounded in an almost intuitive understanding of the persuasive power of information." According to Henderson, new or restructured information is very powerful and can create changes, challenge assumptions, and strengthen citizen power.

Citizen activist groups with a limited resource base wishing to disseminate information espousing alternative viewpoints have had limited access and ability to utilize the mass media. Traditional mechanisms for disseminating information have included the telephone, mass mailings and rallies. With Internet-based technologies, citizen groups are able to get their messages out more quickly to larger numbers of individuals who are more geographically dispersed than was previously possible. Because of a lack of resources and the marginalized nature and small size of such groups, these groups are particularly well suited to productive use of the Internet.

Pierce, Steger, Steel, and Lourich (1992) assert that environmental activist groups recognize the central importance of their information gathering and dissemination roles. The grassroots action-oriented environmental justice movement, which focuses on community-based struggles against environmental inequities in people of color and poor communities, has taken form in the 1990s. Rapid advances in Internet-based technologies have been a concurrent phenomenon. Because the environmental justice movement has risen alongside the proliferation of Internet and communication technologies, it holds great potential for case studies focusing on how grassroots environmental organizations use these technologies to advance their causes. The information presented below is a first step in furthering this understanding, though this article ultimately serves as a call for empirical research addressing these issues.

### **The current state of grassroots environmentalism:**

The evolution of American environmental history can be characterized by 1) the conservationist/preservationist movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries through the closing of the frontier 2) a brief era of environmental legislation starting in the mid 1960s and stopping in 1980 with the Reagan administration 3) mainstream environmental politics of today, and 4) an emerging grassroots broader based activist movement characterized by "multiracial, multiethnic, multiclass, and multicultural" grassroots activism (Dowie, 1995a). Dowie (1995b, paragraph 22) asserts that for this relatively recent surge of grassroots activism to be effective, small organizations need something to bring them and hold them together, and he notes that they are beginning to use the computer to network and share strategies that work.

Networking of environmental justice activists has already produced results in the strengthening of the process for siting hazardous waste facilities (Dowie, 1995a, p. 220).

The oldest environmental organizations, formed largely around wilderness and conservation issues, went on to become lobbying organizations in Washington that have focused largely on the protection of wilderness. As these organizations have become increasingly devoted to mainstream politics and the compromises involved in mainstream politics, grassroots environmental organizations formed, largely in response to health problems threatening family and community that were not adequately addressed by mainstream environmental organizations or the government (Glazer and Glazer, 1998). A growing sense of environmental injustice and betrayal by the government in protecting the health of communities, spurred by such incidents as Love Canal and Three Mile Island, has led to the rise of grassroots environmental activism surrounding issues of toxics, community, and environmental health (Cable and Cable, 1995). Recent grassroots environmentalism has generated much momentum; according to Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW), 7,000 - 8,000 grassroots environmental organizations have formed in the United States surrounding community toxics issues since Love Canal and Three Mile Island (Glazer and Glazer, 1998, p. xx).

The First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, held in Washington, DC, in October 1991, afforded an initial opportunity for grassroots environmental justice organizers to come together on a national level to communicate with each other, share resources, and declare common goals. This networking of individuals and communities around the country involved in grassroots organizing against environmental injustices, subsequently facilitated by the use of Internet-based technologies, has led to a national movement for environmental justice (Kutner and Mares, 1994, p. 4).

### **Uses of the Internet by grassroots environmental organizations:**

For activist organizations with limited resources, Internet-based technologies are providing fast, easy, and cost-effective means through which to access, use, create, and disseminate information. E-mail -- which knows no geographic boundaries -- provides a cost-effective method of communication with other similar minded activist organizations and individuals. E-mail also provides a means of direct access to government representatives. Listservs, which are focused discussion groups disseminated via e-mail, provide opportunities for individuals to join in conversations about timely, focused topics. Organizational Web pages provide mechanisms through which activist groups can affordably disseminate information about themselves to a large,

geographically dispersed audience. Additionally, there is much useful information and data on the Web to further grassroots environmental activists' causes, which has never before been freely and easily accessible. The ability to transport computer files over the Internet allows for rapid distribution of timely information. The Internet also provides access to freely downloadable software.

There are numerous resources available to grassroots environmental activists wishing to use the Internet to further their causes. Schwartz's (1996) book, *Netactivism*, discusses the benefits of Internet use for activists and provides a step-by-step guide to successful Internet use. In an article in *Alternatives Journal*, Meisner (1997) outlines the use of computer networks for the grassroots environmentalist. Dodson (1995) also outlines uses and benefits of the Internet for environmental activists, in an article that appeared in *Sierra*. An article in *E* magazine (Motavalli, 1996) also focuses on the advantages of the Internet for grassroots environmental activists. Many articles also feature lists of selected useful environmental Web sites. Both *E* magazine (1997) and the journal *Environment* (Parris, 1997) have published lists of Web sites specifically useful for environmental justice activists.

Internet resources in the form of Web sites provide a wealth of information and assistance for activists wanting to use the Internet. The Benton Foundation's site, "What's working: advocacy on the Net" <<http://www.benton.org/Practice/Best/advoc.html>> provides a list of advocacy organizations that use the Internet particularly well. NetAction <<http://www.netaction.org>> is a "national non-profit organization that works to ensure that IT and the Internet is affordable and accessible ..., trains activists to use the Internet as a tool for grassroots organizing, outreach, advocacy ..., [and] creates effective citizen action campaigns and coalitions that link cyberspace activists with grassroots organizations." Envirolink <<http://www.envirolink.org>> contains many links for environmental activists. "Designing effective action alerts for the Internet" <<http://dliis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/alerts.html>> provides 20 steps for composing effective Internet action alerts. TRC, the Technology Resource Consortium, <<http://www.igc.org/trc/>> "provides education about and access to information technology to private and public non-profit organizations."

There is much anecdotal evidence to show that Internet-based technologies are being successfully used as tools for the grassroots environmental activist. Through the use of online networking, individuals have been empowered to wage grassroots local anti-toxics campaigns to protect the health of their communities (Ruben, 1995). The decentralized, disintermediated nature of the Internet lends itself particularly well to grassroots activism. Disenfranchised segments of society who are fighting against environmental injustices in their

communities no longer need to deal with intermediaries in the form of the mainstream mass media and established publishing routes. Power, in the form of the ability to create and disseminate information, has been given to relatively powerless segments of society through the use of Internet-based technologies.

### **Political empowerment through Internet technologies:**

As it becomes increasingly possible for individuals and organizations with a limited resource base to take advantage of electronic communication and information access via the Internet, previously marginalized peoples are finding collective voices through communicating and networking with others who are engaged in similar causes and concerns. Because the cost of owning a computer with Internet access is relatively low, individuals have been given unprecedented communication abilities and can network for common causes or communicate directly with their political representatives en masse. "The Internet is a unique medium because of its speed, low cost, easy capacity for forwarding messages, freedom from gatekeepers, and unlimited capacity" (Frantzich, 1999).

Small, grassroots neighborhood organizations whose networkings attempts have previously been restricted by geography have the ability to easily and quickly communicate with similar organizations around the country and around the world. Social boundaries are being broken down as the ease of communication allows for previously disparate groups working toward the same ends to converse with each other. For example, neighborhood environmental activists can easily converse with academic experts as needed, and small locally based environmental justice organizations can converse with national and international environmental organizations to further their causes. Political boundaries are also breaking down as the Internet provides a mechanism through which to directly contact and challenge government officials.

"Politically alienated individuals in the 1990s and beyond have an unprecedented ability to utilize communication technology to talk to each other and those within and outside their movement" (Sachs, 1995, 97). Internet technologies are being heralded by some as tools which will facilitate a shift from representative democracy back to a more direct democracy, as the technology provides the ability for wide range of participation by people outside existing power structures (Grossman, 1995).

According to Craig (1998), the Internet facilitates communication between citizens and the local government. Citizen participation through community organizations has been a particularly effective route through which to present

a collective voice to local governments. Craig (1998) examines neighborhood organizations in Minneapolis - St. Paul that have used Internet-based technologies to communicate effectively within their own communities and across neighborhoods to build and expand their intra-community and inter-community power base.

Because of its unmediated nature, the World Wide Web provides a new "political space" where open communication is not hindered by profit motives or the gate keeping function of the media. Presently, people and organizations with little or no resources can actively participate in political discussion using Internet-based technologies (Hill and Hughes, 1998). As Internet technologies are increasingly utilized as effective tools for political empowerment, one must wonder what the future holds. Will the Internet of the future be regulated by the government and dominated by commercial interests, as are radio and television (Frantzich, 1999)? How will the Internet evolve as a mechanism for communication as it continues to grow? Davis (1999) takes a more conservative viewpoint and feels that the Internet will not be a tool that ultimately re-arranges political power, but will ultimately be "dominated by the same actors in American politics who currently utilize other mediums" (Davis, 1999, p.5). Nevertheless, the Internet in its present form provides unprecedented opportunities for collective alternative and marginalized voices to be heard.

### **Understanding the Internet as a tool for social change for environmental justice activists**

In order to understand the significance of the impact of Internet-based technologies on the information functions of grassroots environmental justice initiatives, two guiding concepts are suggested, borrowed respectively from the fields of sociology and political science. First, Chatman (1996) examines the insider/outsider dichotomy as related to the flow of information. This model provides an analytical tool for furthering the understanding of the dynamics of the empowering nature of the Internet for disenfranchised parts of the population. Traditionally, insiders (such as government officials) have had privileged access to certain kinds of knowledge and have neglected "to accept sources of information not created by themselves" (Chatman, 1996, p. 193). Outsiders, on the other hand, have not been sought for information and advice, therefore reinforcing the perpetuation by the insiders to the exclusion of the outsiders. The Internet appears to be breaking down this traditional insider/outsider dichotomy, and political empowerment through the use of the Internet can be viewed as a process through which the insider/outsider boundary is being eroded.

Second, the unmediated nature of the Internet can work to the advantage of

traditionally marginalized groups. The concept of disintermediation as it relates to the flow of information on the Internet provides another useful framework for understanding the significance of the Internet for traditionally marginalized groups. Bonchek's (1997) PhD dissertation looks at the effect of the Internet on the flow of political information, and focuses on the concept of disintermediation as an explanatory tool. His thesis evaluates "the hypothesis that the Internet is changing the flow of political information in the United States and thereby changing the pattern of political participation" (p. 216). According to Bonchek, while traditional information resources provide intermediaries that filter out the delivery of political information, the Internet allows direct communication and bypassing of information gatekeepers, "whose roles have shifted to information brokers" (p. 219). The Internet also reduces the cost substantially of communicating through space and time, allowing for greater organization around shared interests, and allowing for a more heterogeneous base of participants in political processes. Because of the disintermediated nature of the Internet, Bonchek feels that the Internet allows for many messages to be delivered to many small audiences (a concept he terms "narrowcasting") rather than a few messages delivered to few large audiences (broadcasting). Bonchek's detailed analysis of the Internet and the flow of political information provides a basis for further understanding the role that the Internet plays in the information functions of environmental activist organizations.

## **Conclusion:**

Grassroots environmental activists have won significant victories in their community-by-community battles against hazardous waste facilities, landfills, and other land uses that compromise the health and well being of neighborhoods and communities. The use of Internet-based technologies by environmental justice activists has already been anecdotally demonstrated to be effective for access, use, dissemination, and creation of information resources. To date, there has not been any systematic research study done on the impact of Internet-based technologies on the information and communication functions of grassroots environmental activist organizations. As the environmental justice movement grows up alongside the information technology revolution, a unique opportunity is provided to study and research the interplay between Internet technologies and the information functions of modern social movements.

Zelwietro (1998) conducted a survey of the use of the Internet in environmental organizations in 10 countries and found an awareness of the Internet's capabilities for environmental organizing that was significantly greater than its use. A systematic research study documenting the details of this use would be very informative on a number of different levels. In addition

to data generated by documenting use of the Internet by environmental justice activist organizations broken down by functions, other issues such as funding, training, and education could be examined, as well as barriers to using the Internet by populations with limited resources. Future funding requests by neighborhood-based organizations wishing to purchase computer equipment could be justified with such data. The growing related area of study that focuses on understanding the Internet, as a vehicle for participatory democracy would also be well served by empirical data. Finally, systematic documentation of the use of Internet-based technologies by environmental justice organizations would serve to increase our understanding of the role of the Internet as a significant feature in information functions of grassroots activist organizations.

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