Export with Care:
Online Disability Rights Campaigning in Britain and America

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This briefing paper provides an introduction to the evolving notion of ‘context’ in online campaigning. It discusses comparative research with disability rights organizations in Britain and the United States and reviews issues of e-action, personalization, and online membership. A previous version of this paper based on the presentation I gave at the 10th E-Campaigning Forum, St. Anne’s College, University of Oxford was released in May 2012. Click here to see a video of the presentation or to browse the Powerpoint overheads, which cover several other points in addition to those discussed below. This research was carried out as part of a larger project on the digitalization of disability rights advocacy funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). For more information, visit: www.filippotrevisan.net.

Key findings:
 Contrary to expectations, British disability organizations were more likely to experiment with a wider range of online media and e-action techniques than their American counterparts;
 For most U.S. disability non-profits, online grassroots action remained confined to email campaigns similar to traditional phone call and letter-writing campaigns;
 ‘Clicktivist’ tools such as e-petitions and online postcards were in steep decline in both countries;
 American disability organizations valued online supporters primarily as potential future (paying) members;
 Conversely, British groups had a more nuanced relationship with online supporters, acknowledging the intrinsic value of low-threshold participation for those who had no desire to become formally associated with a given organization;
 Different online campaigning strategies could be linked to a set of systemic as well as time-sensitive contextual factors. These included: the type of crisis faced by organizations; the nature of the catalyst issue involved; and the constitutional set-up in which they operated.

Is it realistic to expect the same e-campaigning ‘recipes’ to be equally useful in different national contexts? To an extent, this is a rhetorical question. Of course different governance systems, political environments, and cultural norms require campaigners to prioritize certain tactics over others, online as well as offline. Adapting foreign or transnational frameworks to campaign in a specific national context can be incredibly beneficial, but it is not always hitch-free or entirely successful. In light of these issues, scholarly research can help campaigners make better-informed choices. This goes beyond explaining what works or does not work in a specific place at a given moment in time, and involves connecting empirical evidence to academic debates in order to generate a frame of reference that facilitates the job of campaigners as new issues, online tools, and tactics arise.
As such, this paper reflects on two of the main findings uncovered by a research project that examined the use of online media by disability advocacy organizations in Britain and the United States. This investigation took place in the spring/summer of 2011 and relied on in-depth interviews with communication and government relations managers from 27 national disability non-profits in the UK and the U.S., as well as on the ‘inventory’ of their online media repertoires. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance for advocates to expand their interpretation of ‘context’, accounting for both systemic and circumstantial factors when designing an online campaign.

1. Email is king, but not enough for British organizations:

First, it was somewhat surprising to find that seemingly minor differences between the technological preferences of British and American disability organizations signalled in fact fundamentally divergent priorities when it came to communicating with policy-makers. On the one hand, email was the unrivalled medium of choice for the vast majority of U.S. disability rights non-profits (see Table 1), both as a channel for alerting supporters of specific campaign initiatives (i.e. ‘email action networks’) and as a primary tool for political action (i.e. ‘contact your representative’ functionalities).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Email Action Network</th>
<th>Other email updates</th>
<th>‘Contact your representative’ tool</th>
<th>Classic clicktivism (e-petitions, e-postcards, etc.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>NCIL</td>
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<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access Living</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADAPT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Easter Seals</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>×</td>
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<td>The ARC</td>
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</tr>
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<td>MS Society</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – US organizations online action features

On the other hand, although roughly half of the UK organizations considered in this study also run email action networks (see Table 2), British disability groups had eliminated traditional ‘email your MP’ widgets from their web outlets. In addition, several British non-profits had integrated social media in their campaigns through ‘virtual protest pages’ – especially on Facebook – that enabled users who could not join street demonstrations in person to register their support online. This use of online media, and especially its association with grassroots protest, was somewhat ‘out of character’ for organizations that historically have deployed their advocacy efforts within the palace of Westminster rather than in the streets. Finally, the use of classic ‘clicktivist’ features such as online petitions and e-cards was found to have declined steeply in both countries.

These trends were connected to two key issues, one systemic, the other one dependent on the policy agenda and political climate of the moment. Similarly to telephone calls, letter campaigns, and fact-to-face conversations, in the U.S. direct email messages to policy-makers were perceived as useful tools to lobby elected representatives because American party discipline tends to be weaker than in other liberal democracies and possibly overlooked by individual representatives to honour requests from constituents, particularly at election times. On the contrary, the Westminster system, where MPs are under greater pressure to adhere to the party line and stick to manifesto pledges, makes email insufficient and ineffective.
for influencing politicians, calling instead for other, somewhat more daring and experimental uses of new media. This is especially the case in conjunction with acute policy crises, meaning those that involve not only a re-distribution of resources among social groups, but also the re-definition of fundamental rights and entitlements. This is precisely the type of crisis that engulfed British disability groups between 2010 and 12 as they campaigned against the government’s controversial plan for welfare reform. Conversely, in the same period American organizations were involved in a row over federal funding for Medicaid, which fell short of the far-reaching implications to disabled people’s fundamental rights that may have triggered the need for ‘extraordinary’ online action.

Undoubtedly, certain institutional set-ups can promote (or inhibit) technological innovation in campaigning. Nevertheless, these initial findings suggested that progress in online advocacy may not flourish as spontaneously as one might assume, but rather require to be nurtured by events, with ‘profound’ policy crises and disputes over fundamental rights capable of generating a shift towards more participatory repertoires where this would be unlikely under ordinary circumstances.

2. Membership: A shifting concept in the digital era?

A second key issue examined by the project revolved around the idea of ‘online membership’. At first impression, American disability non-profits seemed more successful than British ones at attracting online supporters. For example, at the time of data collection the number of Facebook ‘fans’ for U.S. groups was disproportionately higher than that for UK organizations (see Fig. 1). However, what did online support really mean to those in charge of campaigns? Interviews returned somewhat unexpected results, as American participants in particular drew a clear distinction between the number of online supporters and what they perceived as their actual value.

Crucially, most U.S. disability organizations regarded online user-engagement as an intermediate step towards full (paying) membership. As one participant stated:
“there is no such thing as online membership.”
(Head of communications, US disability non-profit, July 2011)

In other words, American groups considered real organizational strength to be built on a large base of offline subscribers, where online support served primarily an ancillary function as a pre-condition for potential future membership. Although this somewhat detracted from the emphasis placed by the U.S. organizations on email action networks, it was also in line with a widespread tendency for them to consider offline action (e.g. Capitol Hill rallies, policy-makers briefing sessions, Congress testimony, etc.) more effective than digital campaigning. Conversely, UK groups had warmed up to the notion of ‘extended’ online membership (Chadwick, 2007; Bimber et al., 2012), mainly as a way to acquire much needed ‘human’ and financial capital at a time of advocacy emergency. Although British disability organizations had yet to consider the long term implications of this shift, they showed a profound awareness of the need for new forms of participation in order to guarantee their survival as mediators in future disability policy decisions.

The origins of this difference lay again in both systemic and case-specific factors. On the one hand, the severity of the policy crisis faced by UK disability organizations pushed them towards new, if untested, modes of online interaction with supporters. Instead, the different nature of the Medicaid issue in the U.S. did not provide sufficient thrust towards a new membership model. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the distinct position occupied by non-profit organizations in the constitutional architecture of either country also played a part in this process. As U.S. organizations operate in a system that has historically incorporated interest groups as fundamental components of the policy-making apparatus, the obligations of these groups towards ‘full’ subscribers could explain some of their reluctance to identify potentially volatile online supporters as ‘members’. On the contrary, British charitable and non-profit organizations have become prominent policy-making actors only in recent decades and their role remains less ‘formalised’ than that of their American counterparts. Thus, online ‘membership’ is useful acquire additional legitimacy in the eyes of policy-makers while also catering for those who support a certain cause but at the same time have no desire to be formally attached to a given organization. Finally, another systemic element involved in this process was organizational funding. The U.S. non-profit model ties the financial survival of advocacy organizations to the receipt of private donations. As such, it was only logical for American disability groups to ‘frame’ the value of online supporters as potential future ‘members.’ Instead, UK charities are more likely to be in receipt of public funds, especially if they act as service providers in addition to their advocacy work. Although this system tends to generate intra-organizational competition, it can mitigate the need for private donations, enabling a more nuanced range of relationships with online supporters.

3. The rules of the game:

Overall, these were rather counter-intuitive findings. This is because, on the basis of internet usage statistics and previous research on e-government, U.S. disability organizations – rather than their British counterparts – were assumed to be at the forefront of innovative online campaigning,. What lessons, then, should campaigners take away from all this? Despite the limited evidence discussed in this paper, a series of elements emerged as clear determinants of tools and tactics in online campaigning and of its value more broadly. These can be summarised as questions that may be useful for activists and advocates to consider when designing the online components of a campaign:

1) Crisis type: is the campaign merely targeted at achieving tangible policy objectives, or should wider political implications be taken into account?
2) Catalyst nature: does the central campaign issue focus on the re-distribution of resources (with potentially divisive effects) or rather on an ideological dispute (with potentially unifying effects)?
3) Constitutional set-up: are parties strong and operating within a highly centralised institutional context, or are individual representatives more flexible in their choices and part of a looser federal system? Do interest groups sit inside or outside the policy-making ‘tent’?

While constitutional set-up is a systemic and therefore more predictable feature, crisis type and catalyst nature are likely to vary from case to case, making it difficult to anticipate their exact characteristics. Nevertheless, this shows that online campaigning never really starts with a blank canvas. Instead, it is highly influenced by these and possibly other contextual factors. Therefore, scholars and practitioners alike may find it useful to focus on the questions above when studying or indeed planning a new campaign. This list is only a starting point and future research as well as campaign experience will undoubtedly add other factors to Crisis, Catalyst, and Constitutional Set-Up. Yet, these three ‘C-s’ constitute key elements that are likely to remain at the centre of online campaigning in any given democratic context.

References:


Organizations involved in the study:

UK:
Scope (www.scope.org.uk)
The MS Society (www.mssociety.org.uk)
Inclusion London (www.inclusionlondon.com)
United Kingdom Disabled People’s Council (UKDPC – www.ukdpc.net)
Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD – www.lcdisability.org.uk)
Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB – www.rnib.org.uk)
Mencap (www.mencap.org.uk)
Disability Alliance (www.disabilityalliance.org; from Jan. 2012: www.disabilityrightsuk.org)
Mind (www.mind.org.uk)
Ambitious About Autism (www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk)
Action for ME (www.afme.org.uk)

USA:
American Association of Persons with Disabilities (AAPD – www.aapd.com)
National Federation of the Blind (NFB – www.nfb.org)
Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDAA – www.ldanatl.org)
National MS Society (www.nmss.org)
Mental Health America (NMHA – www.nmha.org)
National Council on Independent Living (NCIL – www.ncil.org)
National Disability Rights Network (NDRN – www.ndrn.org)
The ARC of the United States (www.thearc.org)
United Cerebral Palsy (UCP – www.ucp.org)
Access Living (www.accessliving.org)
Autism Speaks/Autism Votes (www.autismvotes.org)
Easter Seals (www.easterseals.com)