



INTERNET AND NEW MEDIA

Why Hasn't 'Big Data' Saved Democracy?

Micah Sifry's new book offers some answers, but misses important shifts in the power base of traditional progressive organizing.

By Marshall Ganz

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In his new book, *The Big Disconnect: Why the Internet Hasn't Transformed Politics (Yet)*, Personal Democracy Forum founder Micah Sifry asks a very good question: what ever happened to the prediction that a radically cheapened cost of connection would displace traditional political gatekeepers, not only radically opening up politics, but also producing a real shift in the balance of power?

Sifry, an insider, offers an honest assessment of the effects of the new technology on politics, calling out his colleagues courageously in ways that can be useful to outsiders as well. Defining his terms at the outset, he provides us with a helpful roadmap: the “Internet” is “the set of protocols and practices that allow computing and communications devices to connect to each other and share information *and* the set of cultural behaviors and expectations that this underlying foundation makes possible.” Politics is “everything we can and must do together;” democracy is “a system in which all people participate fully and equally in decisions that affect their lives.”

Sifry focuses on the years 2003 to 2012: from the Dean for President campaign’s innovative use of the Internet to scale small donor fundraising, through the period during which online advocacy projects proliferated, and concluding with the 2012 Obama presidential campaign’s enormous investment in precision-targeted voter “activation.”

He explains why the Internet has failed to transform politics in two key chapters: “Big Data and the Politics of Computational Management,” focusing on the increasing cost of campaigning, and “Big Email and the Politics of Passive Democratic Engagement,” focusing on the hollowing out of political capacity.

In “Big Data,” Sifry argues that, paradoxically, the low cost of collecting data enabled its acquisition on such a massive scale that the cost of using it grew exponentially. This created profitable business opportunities for those with the expertise to use the data, and raised, rather than lowered, the cost of campaigning. Of the twenty-five most visited websites, Sifry points out, only one, Wikipedia, is a nonprofit. The rest are hardly hubs for political action; he tellingly describes them as “online malls” in which we are invited to “hang out.” (And the largest such data gatherer of all, the NSA, threatens citizen efficacy perhaps most of all.)

The trouble with “Big Email,” the kind of online advocacy Move.On pioneered, is that even as the Internet makes it easier for us to “find each other,” it makes it harder for us to “bind with each other,” writes Sifry, in “common focus.” Big email mobilizers may aggregate millions of individual voices, but fail to connect owners of these voices to each other to create any new collective political capacity. As a result, Sifly wisely observes, it is easier to generate what he calls

“stop energy”—that is, the reaction of individuals to crises—than the “go energy” created by people working together to solve common problems. Big Email franchisers of “distributed campaigns” like Change.org simply increase the number of individuals mobilizing mini-campaigns to support customized causes. The result is a cacophony that is much more “noise than signal,” says Sifry. Even more significant, at most online advocacy organizations, the people being mobilized aren’t the ones making decisions as to when, on whose behalf, or for what purpose to mobilize. Instead, the individuals who “own” the lists make these calls, relying on polling to “sample” their “base” for “input.”

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Sifry’s case is persuasive, but incomplete. Although he sees the problem, he locates its sources, and solutions, only in the technology. But what about the people who chose to use technology in the ways they do? Is the agency in the tools, or in those who use them?

One glaringly important question noted but left unaddressed is why new technology seems to have had a far greater impact on progressive politics than on conservative ones. Why is the NRA, for example, indifferent to the new technology, while anti-gun violence groups are almost entirely dependent on it?

Are progressives more technologically minded? Do their causes and candidates lend themselves more to digital mobilization? Are they more creative?

That new technology enables the emergence of a professional cadre whose wealth and power depend on control of that technology is nothing new. It happened with television, direct mail fund raising, and early forms of targeting, too. But why, unlike television and direct mail, has the Internet effect has been far more evident on the Left than on the Right?

The fact that Sifry fails to explore this question may be rooted not only in a kind of “technological determinism” but also in a kind of commitment to direct democracy—a belief that “true” democracy requires the ongoing and unmediated expression of a preference by every individual affected by any decision.” This makes it hard for him to recognize good organizing, which is based on the role of leadership in mobilizing, developing and expressing shared preferences through organization, party, or chosen representative. For Sifry, “leadership,” a word not used until his last chapter, only means “ruling over” someone else. He loves detail when it applies to technology, but that goes out the window when it comes to getting the Sierra Club’s representative democracy right, or accurately characterizing the role of the great civic associations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (he says they served “men only,”

when they were major vehicles through which women—the National Congress of Mothers, for example—and African-Americans organized). Our history, alas, is littered with “direct democracy” reforms that produced contrary outcomes by creating organizational vacuums that were quickly filled by individuals with the money, know-how, and interest to take advantage of them.

Could it be that a power vacuum on the left ceded leadership to the mavens of new technology, a rising generation steeped in rhetoric of direct democracy but with little or no experience with the leadership, organizing, and constituency building it takes to create build real grassroots power? After all, where would a rising generation of young activists have learned basic organizing skills given the dearth of effective examples on the left? Especially when those who were committed to organizing seemed to miss the promise of digital tools entirely.

By 2000, traditional progressive civic and political organizations had long been overwhelmed by urgent claims based on race, gender, and generation that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Although these challenges were essential and long overdue, they cost the organizations legitimacy, denying them the opportunity for generational renewal as well. Progressive denominations other than the Black church struggled, while conservative churches grew

more potent. The labor movement, also challenged by demands of diversity, struggled to find ways to respond to a re-energized neoliberal assault initiated by pro-business groups in the 1970s. And in the Democratic Party, reforms calling for “direct democracy” replaced mechanisms of constituency representation—imperfect though they were—with primary elections, direct mail marketing, paid canvass operations and commercialization of the electoral process. In the midst of this turmoil, the few sustained efforts to build organized constituencies, mostly in the form of community organizing increasingly dependent on “non-partisan” donors, focused either on building relationships within fragmented local communities seeking modest gains or finding new ways to mobilize financial support, such as paid canvass operations.

And on the right?

Safely ensconced within a politics of homogeneity, conservatives reinfused familiar forms of leadership, organization and constituency-building with new energy, motivation and relevance. Protestant Evangelical churches, anti-choice, anti-bussing and anti-tax campaigns, and, of course, the NRA, touted better organized constituencies, clearer forms of coordination, and, ironically, more authentic mechanisms of internal self-governance.

By the time Howard Dean ran for President in 2003, little remained of organized constituencies on the left. Sifry focuses only on use of the Internet to create a marketplace for small donor fund raising and revels in “open” conversations hosted on the campaign website as a sign of direct democracy to come.

But he misses the organizing lessons entirely. He fails to note that the individual input enabled by “big email” is free of the commitments, relationships, structures—and leadership—that create the shared identity, decision-making venues and capacity for action, that enable real collective effort. Internet-facilitated “meet-ups” across the country prove his point that technology makes it easier for us to find each other. But he blames the fact that few ever turned into organized action on the technology, not the campaign’s failure to recognize the critical role of training, organization and leadership in turning “meet-ups” into organized political power.

He also fails to recognize the organizational success the campaign realized in New Hampshire, where state campaign manager, Karen Hicks, turned her thirty-five full-time paid canvassers into trained grassroots organizers who created the foundation for Dean for America, turned the state “blue” in the November election, and launched a core of young people who would serve as the heart of the unprecedented grassroots volunteer organization at the base of the

2008 Obama campaign that engaged some 1.5 million volunteers. That's a goal Sifry claims to seek, but which he dismisses as the result of a "cult of personality."

To be sure, the Obama volunteer organization was staffed by hundreds of young full-time organizers, inspired by a candidate who embodied a promise of "real change" and funded by his campaign. And that network was tragically put to sleep by the administration after the election was over. But failing to learn from how all those people made the most effective collective constituency-based contribution to progressive politics in memory—or to attribute it entirely to social media—is only evidence of the distraction dreams of direct democracy can produce. In fact a whole new generation of activists were introduced to basic organizing skills, a capacity amplified by the training, mobilizing and coaching activities of the New Organizing Institute, and percolating its way into a wide variety of efforts.

Sifry is not alone. He shares this blind spot with national media, who remain dazzled by bright shiny new technology, missing the difference between pageviews and people, and themselves understanding little of what powerful grassroots politics looks like. That misconception most importantly contributes to misdirection of millions of progressive dollars to the chimera of Big E-mail, based on the advice of the

people with the most to profit from it. Big E-mail has been used mainly to mobilize individual resources, not to organize those individuals to act with each other. Mobilizing individuals without developing the kind of leadership and organization constituency building requires it is at best a flash in the pan. Meanwhile, the technologically “backward” Tea Party managed to redirect national politics for the past four years, the NRA can almost effortlessly trump the wishes of 85 percent of the American public for background checks, and the vastly expensive advertising and lobbying campaign of the DC environmental groups came up with nothing.

Of course a more interactive, interpersonal and visually accessible technology could help. Sifry cites the development of Loomio or SeeClickFix software as interesting ways to facilitate collaborative decision-making or cultivate “social capital,” if not purposeful organization. For five years I’ve been teaching an online distance-learning organizing class using a WebEx platform that enables real time interactive face to face classes amplified with use of chat and polling functions. Finding ways to bring experiential, interpersonal and community-building pedagogy online was driven not by WebEx engineers, however, but by a teaching team determined to figure out how to make good teaching work across boundaries of place.

The same thing goes for our politics. Until leaders, organizers and advocates who understand the difference between utopian democratic dreams and what it takes to make real democracy work step up and take charge, what can be a wondrous new capacity for communication will continue to be used in ways that only make things problems worse.

Marshall Ganz Marshall Ganz worked on the staff of United Farm Workers for sixteen years. A political organizer, he is a senior lecturer in public policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

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