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Lobbying and Law - Digital Democrats 'Move On'

Louis Jacobson

In the old days, political rebels took matters to the streets. These days, a low-key revolutionary like Zack Exley can energize the electorate from a chair in a coffee shop.

Exley, 33, is the organizing director of MoveOn.org, the liberal e-mail network that has taken the political establishment by storm. Before plunging into an interview with National Journal, Exley pulled out his laptop, logged on to the wireless Internet connection at the Starbucks on Washington's Dupont Circle, punched a few keys, and instantly sent an e-mail urging half a million MoveOn activists to fight against the recall of California Democratic Gov. Gray Davis.

It's the kind of mass mobilization that MoveOn has been perfecting, by trial and error, ever since the impeachment proceedings against President Clinton—the event that lent the organization its original name in 1998, “Censure and Move On.” Since then, MoveOn has surfed a wave of Democratic frustration, over issues from the war in Iraq to the Texas redistricting fight to the media-ownership squabble at the Federal Communications Commission. In fits and starts, MoveOn has amassed an e-mail database of 1.6 million Americans, plus another 700,000 people in other countries (primarily opponents of the war).

John Hlinko, an early MoveOn staffer who recently became director of Internet strategy for Wesley Clark's presidential campaign, describes MoveOn as “a tool for aggregating and channeling popular discontent in a productive fashion. For people in America who are ticked off, but scattered, it provides a great mechanism to channel that ticked-offedness back to members of Congress.”

Michael Cornfield, research director of the George Washington University Institute for Politics, Democracy, and the Internet, calls the folks at MoveOn “political alchemists” who “have shown that they can turn the reaction to news into political power.”

Experts say that MoveOn—founded by Wes Boyd and Joan Blades, a married couple who made a small fortune in software during the 1990s—has succeeded less because of a stunning technological insight than because of the accumulation of modest advances in organizing technique and Internet presentation.

MoveOn has become expert at slicing and dicing its database by geographic area and political interests, which allows it to swiftly funnel its members' concerns, and their money, to the most appropriate political figures. In some cases, the group has set up user-friendly pages that let members give money to specific advertising campaigns, thus heightening the transparency of donations and giving members a sense of control over how their money is spent.

Most important, perhaps, has been the group's ethos of experimentation and flexibility. Having outlived the impeachment debate, MoveOn stays relevant by reinventing itself whenever a political crisis resonates among liberal voters. Fittingly, MoveOn is able to “move on” whenever the political landscape changes.

“Wes and Joan, in addition to being politically savvy, are dot-commers who understand that the way to succeed is to keep tweaking and tinkering until you get it right,” Cornfield says. “Now because of their work on Iraq and impeachment, they’re able to exert significant muscle.” Other experts agree that MoveOn’s ability to become a vessel for a variety of political efforts has helped broaden its appeal.

MoveOn chooses its projects by listening to its members. Organizers gather this intelligence through unsolicited e-mails from participants as well as occasional questions sent out to its members, Exley says.

For instance, MoveOn’s online Democratic primary earlier this year emerged after organizers asked members whether they wanted one; more than 95 percent of those who responded said yes. As it turned out, no candidate won the required 50 percent of votes to earn MoveOn’s official endorsement. (Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean—who had by then become a master of online fundraising— finished first, with 44 percent of the 318,000 votes cast.)

Simon Rosenberg, president of the middle-of-the-road New Democrat Network, sees MoveOn as part of the leading edge of a fundamental change in which politics “left the broadcast era and entered the digital age.” The Internet is allowing millions to participate in the political system as never before, he says, adding, “The 2004 election will look like a massive battle scene from Star Wars, with tens of millions of people fighting the fight every day. That’s what democracy should be about.”

Even Larry Purpuro, a conservative who runs the Internet marketing company Rightclick Strategies, admires MoveOn’s accomplishments. MoveOn has “built an online army,” Purpuro says. “Unlike a lot of organizations who are trying to use the Web, they clearly understand that it’s about e-mail, not about a pretty Web site.”

MoveOn’s timing was right because the group entered the political fray just as voters’ confidence in political parties was declining, says Dan Carol, a Democratic political strategist. “People are looking for trusted filters,” he says. Belatedly, such key liberal organizations as the AFL-CIO and the Democratic National Committee are now playing catch-up, attempting to boost their Internet organizing capabilities.

MoveOn’s success was hardly preordained. Ever since the Internet emerged as a major medium in the mid-1990s, savvy politicians have figured that it would offer a cheap, efficient way of mobilizing voters. But early efforts, such as Grassroots.com, Speakout.com, and Voter.com, met with disappointment and either shut down or entered new lines of business. Rather than using the “we-will-build-it-and-they-will-come” model, Boyd says, MoveOn goes to the 1.6 million people “who know us already, and we say, ‘We have a question—what do you think about Iraq?’ We’ll get tens of thousands of people responding, and that’s real energy.”

MoveOn is also credited with attracting political-minded people who have little patience for conventional forms of political trench warfare. MoveOn participants aren’t interested “in the traditional, shoe-leather stuff,” says Ruy Teixeira, co-author of *The Emerging Democratic Majority* and a rank-and-file participant in MoveOn. “To the extent they’re roping in these types of people and pointing them toward politics, I think it’s just great for the Democrats.”

Remarkably, MoveOn has accomplished all this on the cheap. The group boasts only four staffers, plus its founders, who continue to guide MoveOn without pay. The group has no fancy headquarters; staffers tend to work out of their homes, and much of the technical support is outsourced as the need arises. “I think it’s impressive, and frightening to established political organizations that have plenty of bureaucracy and little success” on the Internet, Purpuro says.

The spirit of MoveOn is embodied in its founders, whose Northern California unpretentiousness explains why the duo is universally known as “Wes and Joan.” The couple is considered extremely casual. Hlinko says they seem to enjoy themselves the most while hosting dance parties for friends at their home.

Boyd is the grandson of an autoworker and the son of a University of California (Berkeley) political science professor who got his education through the GI Bill. As a youngster, he remembers many political discussions around the dinner table. A lifelong Democrat, Boyd calls himself “a progressive” with “a deep respect for the Framers of the Constitution, and checks and balances.” His liberalism, however, is leavened with real-world experience as an entrepreneur. In 1997, the couple sold Berkeley Systems—a software company best-known for its “Flying Toasters” screensaver—to Cendant for \$13.8 million.

Within months of the sale, the Clinton impeachment became a national obsession. As would be the case several years later with the war in Iraq, the couple detected a vacuum where a place for critics to express their views was needed. So they provided one.

“We shared the frustration that a lot of people felt—that so much of our national time was being spent on impeachment,” Boyd recalls. “So I put together a Web site that said that we should move on, and I shared it with a few friends. It was clear that people were passionate and frustrated, but couldn’t make contact with leaders in Washington, D.C. From that point, we tried to help those people be effective in communicating [with] their leaders.”

Exley credits Boyd and Blades with establishing just the right tone—passionate but levelheaded. “We send out these e-mails just as if they’re going to our friends and colleagues,” Exley says. “We’re not talking down to people, we’re assuming they are just as angry as we are.”

Exley himself became a favorite among Web activists during the 2000 campaign when he posted a parody on then-candidate George W. Bush, called GWBush.com. The site, which had stories poking fun at some Bush missteps, caught the Bush campaign’s attention. At a news conference, Bush attacked Exley as a “garbage man,” saying that such Web sites show that “there ought to be limits to freedom.” Afterward, Exley’s site logged even more visitors.

Whether these same folks or others are receiving MoveOn’s missives is not entirely clear, because MoveOn has not undertaken sustained, sophisticated surveys. Outsiders speculate that MoveOn’s minions are whiter, more liberal, and more likely to be professionals than the Democratic Party as a whole. Boyd says that, from scattered evidence, the member base appears to be roughly similar to the Democratic population as a whole, but probably “a bit younger and a little bit more educated.”

Activists who have partnered with MoveOn say the group is uncompetitive when cooperating with other groups. Part of that has to do with the fact that Boyd and Blades do not want MoveOn to become a diversified advocacy organization. “They have very little institutional ego,” says Chellie Pingree, the president and CEO of Common Cause, which worked with MoveOn to stop an FCC effort to lift restrictions on media ownership. “They’re far more dedicated to advancing the causes they’re concerned about and giving the public a voice than they are about institution-building. And they don’t keep closely guarded secrets. Any question we ask, they answer.”

MoveOn’s cooperative approach owes something to the fact that its small staff can’t do everything by itself. “The best issue campaigns combine an online component with an on-the-ground component,” says Ralph G. Neas, president of the liberal advocacy group People for the American Way, which has partnered with MoveOn to fight some of President Bush’s judicial nominees. “You have to have on-the-ground activists meeting, physically, with members of Congress in their home districts. The combination of the two is stronger than either one separately.”

In early 2003, People for the American Way and MoveOn joined with Working Assets, another liberal group, to set up home-state meetings with almost 50 senators to discuss the Bush administration’s judicial appointees. Common Cause partnered with MoveOn on the FCC campaign, resulting in an online petition with 340,000 signatures, including 200,000 sent to the FCC over a two-day period.

MoveOn’s members don’t just contribute opinions to the group, they give money, too. Boyd says that MoveOn spent \$2.3 million on operations from July 2002 through June 2003, up from \$250,000 in the previous 12-month period. He estimates MoveOn will spend significantly more this year. At the height of the Iraq debate this spring, MoveOn sent out an appeal to help pay for a \$50,000 advertising campaign in The New York Times. It received \$400,000, almost overnight. Much of that total came in the form of \$40 contributions from rank-and-file participants. MoveOn’s political action committee, which is a legally separate organization, raised \$4.2 million in the 2002 election cycle, up from \$3.1 million in 2000.

Small, returning donors form the lifeblood of the organization, Boyd says. Boyd and Blades have given roughly \$50,000 of their own money to MoveOn. In addition, the San Francisco Foundation Community Initiative Funds has funneled some of its funding from the Curtis and Edith Munson Foundation to MoveOn. The Richard & Rhoda Goldman Fund have lent financial support directly.

At least one campaign finance lawyer, Craig Engle, a specialist in political finance issues at the law firm Arent, Fox, Kintner, Plotkin & Kahn and a former Republican Party official, questions the legality of the funding MoveOn gets from the San Francisco Foundation. As a 501©(4) organization, MoveOn can participate in most types of political and lobbying activities, Engle says. But 501©(3) organizations such as MoveOn’s foundation donors are tax-exempt and barred from many types of political and lobbying efforts, he adds. The rules governing tax-exempt groups forbid a 501©(3) from getting around the restriction by simply handing off money to a 501©(4), he says.

Boyd responds that campaign finance law also allows a 501©(3) to allocate a portion of its budget to grassroots funding. Further, he notes that Greg Colvin, who wrote a book on

legal requirements for 501©(3) and 501©(4) groups, represents MoveOn and structured the funding arrangement between the two organizations. Boyd estimates that the San Francisco Foundation's charitable lobbying allocations were about \$100,000 during the past fiscal year.

Even as it continues to raise funds, MoveOn.org must deal with whether it will continue to expand its influence. While it has marshaled activists to stop a range of policies, MoveOn has not become as adept at pushing affirmative solutions.

And because MoveOn has a small staff, some organizational details are left to rank-and-file members, without close oversight from headquarters. In one case this summer, MoveOn's site hosted an issues backgrounder about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a topic on which MoveOn doesn't focus much attention. Jewish activists complained that the page was heavily tilted toward the pro-Palestinian viewpoint.

After "a good back-and-forth," one activist says, MoveOn added an explanatory note and a disclaimer to the page. The page, it turned out, had been posted by volunteers and had not been thoroughly vetted. While those who disagreed with the page's political slant praise MoveOn's subsequent responsiveness, the group's reliance on large numbers of scattered volunteers—for setting up in-person meetings with politicians, for instance—places stewardship of the group's name in the hands of unsalaried people who may not be closely watched by top officials.

And while listening to its members is a strength, MoveOn may be acting on too many fronts. In the past few months,

e-mails have been sent to members not only on the recall in California, the Texas redistricting battle, and President Bush's \$87 billion request for Iraq, but also to push the White House to reveal who leaked the name of a CIA agent to columnist Robert Novak, and to urge the firing of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

In another recent instance, MoveOn asked its members to blitz the offices of House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., and Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, with phone calls protesting the FCC's media-ownership rules. DeLay's office struck back by forwarding the calls to the cellphone of MoveOn's campaign director. The folks at MoveOn "risk losing their focus if they are involved in too many things," said one expert on politics and the Internet who is generally supportive of MoveOn's efforts.

Exley acknowledges the risks, but he adds that the group's current structure offers benefits as well. "This kind of organizing lets you communicate with every single participant," Exley says. "In other organizations, you have a hierarchy with regional leaders and local leaders. With MoveOn, everyone who goes into meetings has read the same materials as the leaders have."

MoveOn has no plans to change its structure, mission, or overhead in any significant way—except for the continued growth of its e-mail list. Republican Web expert Purpuro compares MoveOn to the fast-multiplying coffee emporium from which Exley was able to send out the California recall e-mail to a half-million people. "They're probably like Starbucks in 1992," Purpuro says. "I don't know if their growth rate will surpass what they've done recently, but they still have plenty of terrain to cover."

Staff Correspondent Bara Vaida contributed to this story.