# THE 'NET' EFFECT IN POLITICS

## The 'Stop the Overlay' Campaign in Los Angeles

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### ABSTRACT

New information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the Internet, can facilitate the rapid exchange of information that is essential to coordinating political activity. This case study examines a cyber-advocacy campaign in which the Internet was employed effectively to impact public policy and regulatory change in US telecommunications. The Internet facilitated collective action not only by altering the costs of communication but also by reshaping access in ways that enabled the campaign to reconfigure the networks of communication among key political actors and an otherwise fragmented group of citizens. However, the dilution of these outcomes over time raises further questions about the longevity of such virtual cyber-advocacy networks.

KEY WORDS ▪ campaigning ▪ cyber-advocacy networks ▪ Internet

## Introduction: The Rise of Net Politics

Since the late 1990s, the Internet has become one of the most prominent new information and communication technologies (ICTs) tied to grassroots political campaigns and social movements around the world. Highly visible illustrations of the reliance some organizers placed on ICTs in managing political activities are the key role played by the Internet in coordinating the protests by about 40,000 demonstrators from across the globe at the 1999 World Trade Organization's summit in Seattle, Washington and from more than 100,000 activists in Genoa, Italy in July 2001 at a meeting of the Group of Eight (G-8) industrialized countries.[1]

For decades, proponents of electronic democracy have heralded the potential for ICTs to support more democratic patterns of political participation (Dutton, 1999: 173–93; Grossman, 1995; Laudon, 1977). Since the mobilization of groups is fundamental to pluralist systems, ICTs that

support many-to-many and group communication, such as electronic mail or teleconferencing, have been a particular focus of research. The widespread diffusion of the Internet and World Wide Web has been accompanied by a growing number of anecdotal accounts and empirical studies of the role that so-called 'cyber-campaigns' can play in political activities, particularly at the grassroots level (Bimber, 1998, 2000; Tsagarousianou et al., 1998; Wittig and Schmitz, 1996). While studies have described the use of the Web and other new media, research often fails to uncover the role of the Internet in reshaping the politics of information, such as by understanding how, if at all, ICTs might reshape the access of participants to information and people by providing communication networks that are critical in the mobilization process behind collective actions (e.g. Dutton, 1999; Marwell et al., 1988; Rash, 1997).

Our research has sought to contribute to an understanding of such outcomes through an analysis of a successful campaign in the USA, where the Web was credited by the press and participants with reshaping public policy. Called 'Stop the Overlay', this initiative was aimed at blocking the imposition of a telephone area code 'overlay' for the western region of the County of Los Angeles, California. This involved the creation of a new area code – the three digits preceding a local telephone number – that would be superimposed (overlaid) on the geographical area covered by an existing code. The development of this overlay would double the telephone numbers available for use, but it would mean that all telephone subscribers in the area covered would need to dial 11 digits (1 + area code + telephone number), even if they were calling their next-door neighbours.

We chose this case in order to assess critically the claims tied to the Internet's role in enabling this campaign to succeed. The campaign, within a six-month span, helped redefine the public agenda and change public regulatory policy. However, it was also of interest because of the nature of the issue. Compared to many issues of state and local politics, such as expanding an airport or building a power plant, the imposition of an area code appeared to have relatively less likelihood of generating a 'public uprising', as claimed by the *Los Angeles Times* (Douglas and Shiver, 2000). This case study therefore seemed to be a good opportunity to describe the role of the Web in a successful cyber-campaign, and identify themes and patterns that might provide insights to other Web campaigns (Bennett and Fielding, 1999).

## The 'Stop the Overlay' Campaign

New area codes have been proliferating across the United States. This often involves splitting the area covered by an existing code, with some parts adopting the new code. The State of California has had more telephone area codes introduced, and experienced a higher rate of area code splits, than other American states. Since 1992, the number of California area codes

almost tripled to 38, compared to an increase from 3 to 13 in the previous 45 years (PUC, 1999). A change proposed in 1999 for area code 310 is the focal point of this article.

Area code 310 was created in 1992 to relieve a purported shortage of telephone numbers in West Los Angeles. Within only five years, escalating telephone demand led the telephone companies to create a new code as a split from 310. Less than two years on, the local telephone companies claimed to be running out of numbers once again. However, instead of calling for another area code split, the telephone company proposed to implement an overlay, which involved creating a new 424 code.

Across the USA, there have been only a few persistent consumer protests against telephone number changes, despite the frustrations, inconvenience and added costs they cause to consumers and businesses.[2] In West Los Angeles, too, many telephone subscribers were unhappy, but generally resigned to the impending overlay. Nonetheless, a few individuals considered this more than an issue of convenience and quickly became absorbed in a campaign to defeat the overlay.

### The Launch of the Campaign

A defining moment in launching the 'Stop the Overlay' campaign was when one Los Angeles 'Westside' resident and plastic surgeon, Dr. Steven Teitelbaum, received a form letter at his office regarding the proposed change. Teitelbaum (2000) was upset by what he described as the 'condescending tone' of the letter, and by a sense that neither he nor other consumers had been well informed about, or involved in, the decision to impose this overlay. He faxed the letter to his friend Robert Scheer, who is a columnist of *Our Times*, a local edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, and a professor at the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles. Teitelbaum expressed his misgivings about the overlay decision and asked Scheer to look into it.

A nationally syndicated columnist with a background in engineering, Scheer started an investigation by making a series of telephone calls. He became convinced that there was not a shortage and that there was a lack of public accountability in the process of developing and implementing the overlay. He concluded that the decision was the outcome of industry meetings, which lacked real public oversight and participation. Members of the California Public Utility Commission (PUC) were permitted to attend these industry meetings, but they were not allowed to vote. Moreover, to protect proprietary information from competing companies, the telephone company would not reveal the proportion of used numbers to the public and the PUC, even though the numbers were allocated by the PUC free of charge to the telephone companies. Without this information, the public could not know if a real shortage existed. Furthermore, there was no mechanism for the telephone companies to return numbers that were unused.

Scheer's persistence gained him access to lawyers, regulators and industry experts, such as key PUC staff, who validated his conclusion that telephone companies were 'hoarding' numbers. By his estimate, as few as one out of six allocated numbers were actually in use.[3] Another major factor contributing to the alleged 'shortage' was that numbers were allocated in blocks of 10,000, although Scheer claimed digital technology had removed the technical argument for this procedure and it was being pursued only to foster local telecommunications competition (Scheer, 2000a, b).

### *Taking Politics onto the Net*

Scheer began to devote some of his newspaper columns in *Our Times* to the overlay issue, arguing that the real problems of this telephone number shortage 'nonsense' were centred on a technically flawed scheme for the allocation and administration of telephone numbers, which lacked public accountability (Scheer, 1999). His stories ended with telephone numbers of relevant elected officials, which he encouraged readers to call to voice their concerns. Teitelbaum also continued to pursue this issue on his own by setting up the 'No2Overlay@aol.com' Web page on his America Online (AOL) account, to which Scheer began to refer his readers. The AOL page provided people with a more complete list of information on how to contact elected and appointed officials. Residents were asked to write a letter in their own words, rather than to sign a form letter. They were also encouraged to fax it to the listed officials, in addition to contacting them by email and by telephone.

A young colleague of Scheer's at USC, Web design consultant Joshua Fouts, was also a Westside resident, who became convinced that Scheer was right to raise this issue. Fouts felt that the telephone companies and regulators were fixing their problems at the expense of the general public. Fouts and his wife, also a Web designer, voluntarily created within 24 hours a website – www.stopoverlay.com – to take forward the momentum established by Scheer and Teitelbaum. This was first publicized by Scheer, who repeatedly reminded readers of it in his newspaper columns. It was an instant success. Within weeks of its launch, page viewing at the site peaked at nearly 9,000 requests. The hits decreased over time, but stayed over 4,000 per month until after the campaign concluded.

The homepage of the website served as the entry to a networked community, where visitors were able to find people sharing similar concerns, get the latest campaign news, download fact sheets and ask for real-time help. The site also provided links to public officials and other resources. For example, it listed the names and contact information of the five Public Utility Commissioners, along with their positions on the overlay issue. Information regarding official representatives of the local telephone companies was also available on the site.

The website was augmented in July, when Fouts created an email

distribution list that visitors to the site could join in order to receive regular email updates. For instance, the list was used in a call for action in the days before the PUC was about to vote on a proposal regarding the overlay. Interactivity was supported through the site in ways beyond the distribution list. For instance, the message board on the Web provided an 'e-soapbox' for the public, which was used to post general announcements (including gossip and rumours), deal with technical questions and monitor the overlay legislation and relevant campaign or industry news.

### Extending the Communication Network

The 'Stop the Overlay' website and related distribution list were key tools in stimulating and forging collective actions of Westside residents, as it helped the campaign to build public awareness of the issue and place it on the radar screens of politicians, from the local city halls to Sacramento and Washington, DC.

The website's access logs proved valuable to the organizers in tracking the traffic in their campaign site. These showed, for example, that the site was accessed by many visitors other than Westside residents, including: the general public on AOL; the telephone company's headquarters in San Francisco; public officials in Sacramento; and regulators from the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) in Washington, DC.

Independently from the 'Stop the Overlay' campaign, a surge of consumer complaints from their constituents had roused two Democratic Los Angeles politicians, State Assemblyman Wally Knox and US Representative Henry Waxman, to file a petition with California regulators to halt the area code overlay on 10 June 1999. Inspired and supported by the interest demonstrated by citizens, Knox introduced an area code reform bill designed to force state public utility regulators and telephone companies to adopt telephone number conservation measures before an area code split or overlay could be implemented.[4] Days before the vote on this bill, the 'Stop the Overlay' campaign supported Knox in organizing the 'Big Hang-Up', to protest against the telephone companies' manipulation of area codes. The event captured wide press coverage, including the *Los Angeles Times* and four major local television stations, which helped to spotlight the issue and proposed legislation.

Then, hours before a vote on the bill was due on the Assembly floor, Scheer used his cell phone, and reputation as a well-known journalist, to call virtually every voting member of the Assembly rumored to be against the bill. His approach was direct: 'Look, I write a column for the *Los Angeles Times*. I want to know why you are voting against the bill'. Surprised to receive a call like this, some explained that their opposition centred on a particular paragraph in the bill. Assemblyman Knox took the lead in removing this 'poisonous paragraph' 30 minutes before the vote (Scheer, 2000a), and the bill was passed by a nearly unanimous vote on 9

September 1999. Subsequently, the PUC voted 'No' to the overlay on 16 September 1999. The Stop the Overlay website soon declared 'a victory for grassroots activism in the Internet age'.

## *Moving Up the Federal Structure*

US state and local officials are more significant actors in cable and tele-communications matters than are local officials in most other countries. But in the case of area code assignments in the USA, the state PUC's regulatory authority over the local exchange carriers (LECs) has been circumscribed by the FCC. The overlay uproar in West Los Angeles worked to the advantage of some PUC members, who were lobbying to gain more local discretion through a petition to the FCC on 23 April 1999. Five months later, the FCC granted the PUC authority, with conditions, to control overlays and monitor area code usage in various ways, such as by mandating that the telephone companies adopt number conservation measures before an overlay plan could be implemented and establishing usage thresholds, including requiring carriers to submit number utilization data (FCC, 1999). These policy changes were viewed as a response to the campaign's fight for 'public accountability' and they were welcomed by the campaign participants. In their email discussion list, many celebrated their victory. Some asked Teitelbaum: 'What's next?' (Teitelbaum, 2000).

## *The Struggle Does Not End*

The 'public uprising' heralded by the *Los Angeles Times* was over once the overlay plan was killed. But further reforms of area code administration continued, with the FCC granting a waiver to permit telephone numbers within the 310 area to be allocated in blocks of 1,000, as opposed to the previous norm of 10,000. This change was later introduced as a nationwide strategy for conserving numbers (Douglas and Shiver, 2000).

However, the issue soon returned to Los Angeles residents and in ways not anticipated by the 'Stop the Overlay' campaign. Within a year after its victory, the telephone companies were openly lobbying to expand area codes in the Westside and other areas. In a letter to the FCC, telephone companies serving California requested the FCC to force the California PUC to permit 12 new area codes, including 6 within the Greater Los Angeles area (Douglas, 2000).

Before the FCC responded to the request, an audit report was released by the California PUC in February 2001. To the disappointment of many residents, the auditors recommended that the PUC 'split' – rather than overlay – the 310 area code (PUC, 2001). The auditors acknowledged that local telephone companies generally failed to use efficient and accurate data-tracking systems to identify and report telephone number utilization data, which led to substantial underestimation of the number of unused

numbers. Nevertheless, and despite the validation of the telephone number mismanagement practices, the auditors concluded that the additional numbers were not sufficient. They would not extend the use of existing numbers more than nine months, arguing that a backup plan, such as a split of the area code, should therefore be implemented.

To some, this represented a 'bitter defeat for the residents and businesses' that fought the overlay (Douglas, 2001). Protesters attended PUC hearings on plans to split 310. The outcry shifted to the proposed 424 communities in the southern half of the former 310 area, with its local paper, *The Daily Breeze*, taking up the issue in editorials – one proposing an overlay as 'sensible' (*Daily Breeze*, 2001) – and in news coverage, asking whether the split was 'a done deal' (Moore, 2001). The 'Stop the Overlay' campaign was not resurrected by the new proposal, and no equally effective Web campaign emerged to oppose the split.

The battle to stop the overlay had extended the life of 310 for two additional years, and half the area was eventually able to retain the 310 code, including Westside residents and the principal organizers of 'Stop the Overlay'. Dividing the opposition to the overlay in the subsequently proposed split did not silence opposition to the new area code change, but it was not met with action comparable to the 'Stop the Overlay' campaign. The telephone companies were then able to achieve their objectives over a more limited and less organized opposition.

## The 'Net' Effect of a Cyber-Campaign: Central Themes and Issues

The 'Stop the Overlay' campaign was a unique case of cyber-advocacy. However, it is suggestive of themes and issues that could be of significance to the study of other uses of the Web in political campaigns and actions. In this section, we identify the central themes that emerge from this case study. They will gain significance over time to the degree that they are reinforced by analyses of other cyber-advocacy campaigns.

### The Web in a Mix of All Media Channels: A Web-Orchestrated Campaign

One of the strongest themes that carried through this case study was the degree to which the effectiveness of the Web was dependent on the use of all media, not simply the Web. The Internet reinforced and complemented other media. This was apparent in how Scheer and Fouts employed the Web and other channels of communication, from broadcast television to lobbying over the cell phone. A key attribute of the Web page, for example, was its use to generate telephone calls, emails, visits and letters to politicians. Additionally, the organizers used the Web and telephone systems to create

the 'Big Hang-Up' protest, which was successful in gaining TV news coverage for the campaign.

## Reconfiguring Access: Disintermediation of Traditional Gatekeepers

Despite a reliance on multiple media, the Web created an alternative channel for reaching the public that bypassed traditional gatekeepers, a process often awkwardly referred to as 'disintermediation' (Dutton, 1999: 64). An example of this was the ability of the organizers to bypass the *Los Angeles Times*, which decided that public concerns about the overlay were not news. Scheer covered the story in his own column within a local Santa Monica edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, but metropolitan-wide coverage was muted. The newspaper chose not to cover the public opposition to the overlay until the late stages of the campaign, when its success was becoming apparent and its identification as a public 'uprising' was judged to be newsworthy. Despite the newspaper's agenda, the campaign organizers were able to reach directly to an interested public.

## Setting a New Issue Agenda

Agenda-setting is a critical activity, because it shapes what the public thinks about – it defines the issues at stake – rather than only attempting to influence positions on any given issue. By virtue of their ability to bypass traditional gatekeepers and reconfigure access to the public, the organizers were able to redefine the issues at stake in the overlay, and eventually shape the agenda of the more traditional gatekeepers.

The telephone companies had defined the issue as whether to split or overlay area codes to create more telephone numbers. They defined the existence of a number shortage as a given, not an issue. The campaign organizers responded to this by questioning the validity of the shortage and challenging the veracity and accountability of the telephone companies, redefining the focus on stopping any change, forcing the telephone companies to conserve numbers and challenging the PUC to protect consumers.

## The Malleable Geography of Access

At the outset, 'Stop the Overlay' was locally organized and targeted on a local issue. The geography of this campaign contrasts with the expectations surrounding the geopolitics of the Web, and suggests that the geography of Web-orchestrated campaigns is malleable and could be usefully categorized by the degree to which their organizers and the targets of their activities are each localized or distributed (Dutton and Lin, 2001). In contrast to 'Stop the Overlay', for example, many locally targeted campaigns are organized by groups that are not located within one geographical area, such as

the anti-globalization protests in Seattle and Genoa. Cyber-campaigns are well suited to bringing together geographically distributed organizers to focus on action that takes place nationally or globally, as well as in assisting the efforts of locally based campaigns. This is illustrated by the way the geography of the 'Stop the Overlay' campaign evolved when the local issue moved to venues in Sacramento and Washington, DC.

The Web played an important role in changing the geography of access to stories about the overlay. *Our Times* is a local community newspaper in which Scheer's columns about the overlay reached a local audience. The website enabled a more distributed audience to access information on this issue. The stopoverlay.com site enabled the telephone companies, Sacramento politicians and members of the FCC to have direct access to all of Scheer's articles and to witness the public outcry.

### The Staying Power of Cyber-Advocacy Networks

The Web played a similar role in shaping the time horizon of content and communication. With respect to content, it gave Scheer's print stories about the overlay a new lease on life, since they were all assembled and archived on the website. The website's listing of all Scheer's editorials on the overlay was itself an impressive set of headlines that furthered the campaign. In this respect, the Web gave added life to more ephemeral newspaper articles. In contrast, the Web enabled the organizers to rapidly access their growing network of constituents – pushing and pulling information to interested citizens.

However, in other ways, the Web-orchestrated campaign raised issues about the longevity of a cyber-advocacy campaign. The Web may well enable organizations to influence legislative actions at a much faster pace, but the mobilized public support has been short-lived so far in this case. Its success seemed to hinge, in part, on its ability to reach the public affected by the overlay at a high point in the 'issue-attention cycle' (Downs, 1972).

Normally, organization begets organization, but in this case the telephone industry did not choose to organize citizen opposition to the 'Stop the Overlay' campaign within a comparable online campaign. Instead, the industry continued to rely on its longer-term networking strategy, involving a well-organized and financed lobbying effort in Washington, DC and Sacramento. Within a year after the successful conclusion of the 'Stop the Overlay' campaign, the telephone companies had succeeded in convincing the auditors, the PUC and the FCC of the validity of its claims. The cyber-campaign organization had long since dispersed, but it had also been accommodated by the decision to split the area code, leaving the major activists in the former 'Stop the Overlay' campaign with their 310 area code. The greater success of the industry in the longer-term effort raises questions about the ability of a cyber-advocacy campaign to reorganize and sustain

opposition over time against well-organized companies with institutionalized mechanisms for sustaining their activity in politics and public policy.

### *Networks of Networks – Beyond Efficiency*

Bypassing traditional gatekeepers and broadening the geography of access were two ways in which the Web helped reconfigure access in the 'Stop the Overlay' campaign. One of the major social implications of ICTs is the degree to which they reshape access to information, people, services and technology (Dutton, 1999). The most common argument is that the relatively low cost of the Internet will drive more communication online and facilitate more interaction among players, thereby supporting collective behaviour. As Anthony Downs (1957: 255) argued in his classic book on economic theory and democracy: 'The cost of acquiring information and communicating opinions to government determines the structure of political influence'.

However, this case study suggests that the Internet not only changes the way participants communicate with one another, or even the cost and frequency of communication, but actually reconfigures the networks of communication, changing who says what to whom. Before the Web became central to the campaign, strong ties of communication were seen between local telephone companies and regulatory agencies. Regulatory bodies had connections among themselves, even though their interaction might often be routine. On the other hand, Scheer had a personal friendship with Teitelbaum and Fouts, while Teitelbaum and Fouts did not know each other or many other Westside residents at the outset. As a journalist, Scheer managed to reach Westside residents via his column; however, residents had virtually no interaction with the PUC or the FCC. Most importantly, perhaps, the Web became a medium for state legislators to organize the public, by linking the legislators to the organizers of 'Stop the Overlay'.

The Internet – a network of networks – proved critical in forming social networks of previously more isolated social networks. Over the Web, Westside residents, including principal activists, were all tied together within a common communication network. Despite the fact that the LECs maintained linkages with regulatory agencies and officials, consumer activists also managed to contact public officials frequently and efficiently. In other words, the Internet effectively facilitated an existing network, but also further extended the network, connecting different actors across previously separate networks.

## Conclusion

The Web reconfigured the geography and time horizons of access, as well as the networks of communication in ways that changed the dynamics of the policy process. It did not democratize political influence and enable a

purely grassroots movement to arise. To the contrary, it was led and organized by a small group of well-educated, well-financed and technically skilled individuals appealing to an affluent middle-class constituency. This case study reinforces aspects of the 'iron law of oligarchy', with respect to Michels' (1959: 11) claim that 'there are oligarchical tendencies in every kind of human organization which strives for the attainment of definite ends'. However, it enabled this small group to reconfigure access to information and people involved with this policy issue in a way that influenced public policy.

The cyber-campaign accomplished this by employing all channels of communication, not just the Web, to connect an otherwise more fragmented group of citizens and to promote dialogue between citizens and policymakers at a critical point in the public's issue-attention cycle. The Web enabled a small but highly articulate group of organizers to bypass the traditional gatekeepers and redefine the issues at stake in the controversy over regulatory policy. The ad hoc nature of the new political ecology, however, leaves concerns over the durability of virtually networked campaigns in the wake of an opposition with more staying power.

## Notes

This article is a revision and extension of an earlier analysis of an unfolding case study of the 'Stop the Overlay' campaign, incorporating new developments that refine the themes of earlier syntheses of this case (Dutton and Lin, 2001).

1 See, for example, Miller (1999) and Lyman (2001).
2 Some overlay protests have occurred in Maryland, New York, Texas, Georgia, Florida and Colorado.
3 One PUC (2000) report estimated that at least 3 million unused numbers existed in the 310 area code, and approximately 2.7 million were held by carriers.
4 California State Assembly Bill 406 (AB 406), later known as the 1999 Consumer Area Code Relief Act.

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