7

From the Screen to the Streets
By Howard Rheingold

It has taken 10 years of talk about "new media" for a critical mass to understand that every computer desktop, and now every pocket, is a worldwide printing press, broadcasting station, place of assembly, and organizing tool—and to learn how to use that infrastructure to affect change.

Previous technologies allowed users only to communicate one-to-one (telephones) or few-to-many (broadcast and print media). Mobile and deskbound media such as blogs, listservs and social networking sites allow for many-to-many communication. This provides opportunities and problems for progressive political activists in three key areas: Gathering and disseminating alternative and more democratic news; creating virtual public spheres where citizens debate the issues that concern democratic societies; and organizing collective political action.

The new news

Blogs and moblogs, such as the international network of Independent Media Centers, South Korea's influential OhMyNews and MoveOn.org's misleader.org are signs of what *San Jose Mercury-News* columnist Dan Gillmor calls an emerging "we journalism." Each of these sites offers up-to-the-minute news alerts, provided by a combination of citizen-reporters and trained staff. While the owners and administrators of such sites range widely—from passionate individuals to collectives to upstart nonprofits—these blogs are markedly more democratic than their corporate-run, top-down brethren.

Internal and external forces, however, threaten to undermine "we journalism" before its impact is fully realized.

Misinformation, disinformation, incredulity and magical thinking all are problems on the supply side of these new reporting modes. Aggregators of

blog postings—which rank blog listings by popularity, similar to Google's page rank technology—already serve as a filter for this flood of amateur journalism. And reputation systems, filters and syndication services also could develop into useful tools for assessing the veracity of information sites. But political activists and those who sponsor progressive projects also have a role: For "we journalism" to have long-term credibility and lasting impact, progressives must fund, staff and promote media literacy—teaching users to create and consume this new journalism.

Activists also have a role in turning back corporate attacks that seek to privatize the Internet by regulating content and limiting amateurs' ability to produce cultural works that compete with media conglomerates.

Today, a small number of broadband Internet providers, such as Comcast and Viacom, are pushing for regulations that would enable them to pick and choose the content that travels over their part of the network. The courts also are coming to bear in this fight, as companies work to extend copyright far beyond its original intent and establish digital rights schemes that make it difficult to produce or distribute digital content not authorized by the entertainment industry.

The consolidation of media ownership in the hands of a small number of individuals or cartels—who exchange political funding for legislative and regulatory favors—is being fought by organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation. But activists who have not been involved in technology or media issues need to join in this battle, because communication media under dispute are profoundly political tools. In coming decades, Internet-based media will exert more and more influence over what people know and believe and how they can organize and assemble for collective action.

The electronic town square

Network TV news and talk radio are hardly examples of the reasoned debate philosopher Jürgen Habermas had in mind when he described the public sphere as central to the life of a democracy. Indeed, they are an example of the manipulation of public opinion via popular media that he warned about.

Online and many-to-many technologies can shift the locus of the public sphere from a small number of powerful media owners to entire populations. The value of Internet discourse in this effort has not been proven, however, perhaps because the literacy around this use of media has not had sufficient time to mature—the World Wide Web is barely 10 years old, and has been gaining uninitiated users each year.

Now, for better and worse, citizens are arguing with each other—with varying degrees of civility—and sometimes marshaling evidence to buttress logic in countless blogs, listservs, chat rooms and message boards. The quality and level of know-how and the willingness of a significant portion of the population to adopt and self-enforce online etiquette will determine whether reasoned debate will flourish online or be drowned out by surlier

forms of argument. Activists and journalists must take a leading role in determining the success of this outcome by wielding these technologies skillfully and purposively.

Organizing collective action

Only recently have political activists successfully used many-to-many media to mobilize large-scale collective action such as street demonstrations and protests, electoral fundraising, get-out-the-vote campaigns and legislative lobbying. Technologies and methodologies are developing very rapidly at this point, and so are the political moves to neutralize them.

In the United States, Howard Dean's presidential campaign has mobilized the self-organizing capabilities of blogs. Meetup.com and online fundraising propelled this underdog to front-runner status. If Dean wins, 2004 will be the watershed political event for the Internet that the Kennedy-Nixon debates were for television in 1960. In a few years, MoveOn.org also has grown from a Web site protesting the Clinton impeachment to an effective lobbying movement that influences legislation and elections. MoveOn.org played an important part in the recent effort to lobby Congress to overturn the FCC's deregulation of media cross-ownership.

Innovations aren't confined to the United States. Neither ex-President Estrada of the Philippines nor newly elected President Roh in South Korea would be in their present positions if smart mobs had not worked so effectively. In the Philippines, a million citizens used SMS to organize street demonstrations that helped topple the Estrada regime. In South Korea, the cyber-generation, seeing their favored candidate losing in exit polls, used a Web site to organize a get-out-the-vote campaign involving 800,000 personal e-mails and uncounted SMS messages, turning the tide in the election's final hours.

Activists should now concentrate their efforts in this last sphere—technology-amplified collective action. The above examples are just the beginning. The capabilities of media are multiplying, the number of people who use their mobile phones as Internet connections and text-messaging media is growing explosively. And activists are only beginning to experiment with ways to multiply their ability to organize collective action.

Influencing elections and legislation is the sine qua non of effectiveness. In the next few years, peer-to-peer, self-organized, citizen-centric movements enabled by smart mob media will either demonstrate real political influence, be successfully contained by those whose power they threaten, or recede as a utopian myth of days gone by. What progressives know now, and what we do soon, will decide which of those scenarios unfolds.