

The Internet Activist: Getting Involved while Sitting Still

By LISA CANNON

The Internet makes getting involved easier than ever. But do signing petitions and sending email to the President have any impact?

If you've been on the Web for long, then you've probably already visited the Hunger Site (www.thehungersite.com). You might have heard about it through a friend who sent you the good news: there's a way to solve world hunger that's fast, easy and doesn't even cost any money. So you donated a few cups of food and felt better about yourself. Maybe you visit it every day. I try to, though I sometimes forget.

Its focus has grown to include several causes, such as saving the rainforests and fighting breast cancer, but the

basic premise remains: click a button, make a difference. In the same way, the opportunities for Internet activism have grown steadily over the past five years. It's easy to see why—you can do it all from the comfort of your computer chair. Why stand outside a grocery store signing petitions when you can do it via email? Why raise your voice in protest when you can voice your

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opinions online? Not only that, the Web is a great way for people with similar interests and agendas to work together. For example, Linux open source development is possible because programmers around the globe can work together—all thanks to the Web. And their agendas aren't all about

code—politics is also part of the picture.

Online petitions have also become extremely popular. In the last week I must have received at least three: one about the saving the Arctic wilderness, one for helping the space monkeys (yes, space monkeys . . . I'll get to that in a minute), and a new one about reproductive rights. But do forwarded petitions really have any impact? What's the best way to make a difference with the new communications at our disposal?

Linux Lovers—The Web's Most Ardent Activists

Some of the most radical utopian activists on the Internet these days aren't arguing about the environment or politics—they're arguing about operating systems. Linux, to

be precise. Step into the free software fray and you might think you've landed in an issue that's more loaded than gun control. The enthusiasm for Linux is more than a software and hardware issue—it's a way of life. Increasingly, Linux devotees are positioning the operating system as an alternative to Microsoft Windows for the computer masses. And they're not just pushing the issues of cost and stability—they're pushing a political angle as well.

Many Linux users see a dichotomy. To them, Microsoft, the big monopoly, creates systems that allow no freedom of choice and provides no open source code for customization. Then Linux: cooperative programmers around the globe working in the tradition of free software. In their point of view, it's not just Goliath versus David, it's dictatorship versus democracy.

In his proposal "Information as a global public good: A right to knowledge and communication" (<http://danny.oz.au/free-software/advocacy/oicampaign.html>), anti-censorship activist Danny Yee describes knowledge and

Sites for the Online Activist

Here are some excellent sites where online activists can get involved. This is only a tiny sampling of the huge amount of Web-based movements, as well as the Web pages of organizations that have been around a long time. You can also find a great resource on getting involved at Net Action (<http://www.netaction.org/>). So don't just sit there, sit there and do something!

The Hunger Site (<http://www.thehungersite.com/>)

This is a great place for one—click activism, with additional information about each area (preventing hunger, saving rainforests, helping kids with AIDS, supplying Vitamin A for kids, fighting breast cancer, and providing aid to landmine victims) where you can find out more and take additional action.

Peace Action (<http://www.peace-action.org/>)

Peace Action is the nation's largest grassroots peace and disarmament organization. It has global and local action sites and a long list of things you can do to promote peace and global disarmament.

The Feminist Majority Foundation (<http://www.feminist.org/>)

The home page of the FMF is a fantastic forum for women's issues. The "Take Action" area has a long list of up-to-date legislation and events that you can act on, with well-targeted messages (including a place to write to the editor of your local newspaper) that you can personalize. Plus, you can write your representative, register to vote, and read global news.

information as the new commodities of the future. He notes that "Increasingly, information and tools for manipulating and communicating information are controlled ('owned') by individuals or

corporations rather than being public goods available to everyone." He describes "information hoarders" such as corporations that attempt to obtain total control over key intellectual properties in order

to control entire markets (pharmaceutical, biotechnology, software, and media companies) as villains, and describes Richard Stallman, founder of the Free Software Foundation (<http://www.fsf.org/>) and the GNU Project, as a hero.

Some people might say that only geeks would ever need or want to use what has been described as a confusing, hard-to-use system that was cobbled together by an anarchy-in-action system of hackers and programmers across the globe. But that's what people were saying about the Internet, and not so long ago. If it can happen to the Web, who knows what can happen with Linux? But the "no one's at the wheel" format of the Internet leads to problems inherent in such a system—redundancy and inefficiency. One of the best examples of these problems is out-of-date and downright untrue email petitions and campaigns. Forwarded by well-meaning folk, they cause more problems than they solve.

Inbox Overload

The first email petition I ever saw—and signed—was one of

Sites for the Online Activist (Continued)

National Organization of Women (<http://www.now.org/>)
This excellent site addresses a variety of issues that affect women the most, with an area called "Take Action" where you can send letters about specific legislation and sign up for action alert announcements about upcoming events and issues.

The Nature Conservancy (<http://nature.org/>)
Its mission is to preserve plants, animals, and natural resources, and its Web site contains a lot of useful information about protecting the environment. However, many of the action items under the section called "Get Involved" are about donating money, which is indeed an action that can speak louder than words.

World Wildlife Fund (<http://www.worldwildlife.org/>)
The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is dedicated to protecting the world's wildlife and wildlands. Its "Online Action Center" contains archived action alerts, a congressional look-up tool, and resources where you can learn more.

To find out more about Linux and the free software/open source movement, check out the following sites:

Free Software Advocacy (<http://danny.oz.au/free-software/index.html>)
Here the free software movement is linked with the struggle for social justice and connected to freedom of information issues in other areas. News, reviews, and links on the issue are also available.

the most infamous. It was protesting a proposal to cut congressional funding for public broadcasting and the arts. You've probably seen it. Maybe you've signed it. It has been making the rounds since 1995, when two University of Northern Colorado freshmen

emailed it to their friends. Recipients were supposed to tack on their names, pass it along, and, after every 50th signature, forward a copy to the authors.

The petition reached more people than the originators could have possibly imag-

ined. The university's server was inundated with many angry replies to what was often seen as spam. As this petition and many others have proven, email activism can often backfire. But more often the problem is that the whole issue is a hoax, or at the very least, obsolete. The "Save Sesame Street and PBS" petition is still in circulation, even though the legislation is long gone.

I don't like getting mass mailings. My friends know this, and they limit how many "group forwards" they send to me—especially when it comes to petitions. But the well-meaning people in my personal address book have sent me several petitions in the last few days, and as usual I am left in a quandary. Do I take time out of my day to sign it and pass it along? Or do I hit delete?

One of the first things I do when I receive a petition in the mail is examine the cause. Is it a recent cause or is it ancient? Is it pending legislation or vague outrage? Is the petition likely to have any impact? The PBS funding is a prime example of an obsolete petition. The legislation is long gone, so nothing could be done

Sites for the Online Activist (Continued)

The Free Software Foundation (<http://www.fsf.org/>)

The home page for the GNU Project and the Free Software Foundation, here you'll find out what exactly defines free software, why software should not have owners, and how selling free software can be okay.

The Free Software Project (<http://www.salon.com/tech/fsp/index.html>)

Salon online magazine's "Free Software Project" is a book about the history, ideas, and people behind the free software/open source movement. It is being posted as it is being written—what could be called "open source journalism."

Open Source Initiative (<http://www.opensource.org/>)

Open Source Initiative (OSI) is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to managing and promoting the Open Source Definition for the good of the community, specifically through the OSI Certified Open Source Software certification mark and program.

SourceForge (<http://sourceforge.net/>)

SourceForge is a free service for open source developers offering easy access to the best in CVS, mailing lists, bug tracking, message boards and forums, task management, site hosting, permanent file archival, full backups, and total Web-based administration.

about it anyway. I can't claim to be an expert on bills pending in Congress, so I often

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check the Urban Legends (<http://www.snopes2.com/>)

"Inboxer Rebellion" page, where hoaxes, virus alerts, and petitions are given the true-or-false test.

The researchers at Urban Legends also pose several important questions you should ask yourself about any petition you receive. Let's take a look at one example—this time for protection of space chimps, the primates used by NASA in the space program.

Here's the text of the original petition:

Like most of these issues, if you really feel strongly about a cause, you should do more than forward a petition. In reality, a signature at the bottom of a check is worth a lot more than an electronic signature on an e-petition.

The Air Force owns 143 chimpanzees who are members or descendants of the original colony of chimpanzees used in space exploration. The chimpanzees are currently leased to The Coulston Foundation, a biomedical research facility where many questionable chimpanzee deaths have occurred. The Coulston Foundation is currently under investigation by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for violations of the Animal Welfare Act (AWA).

The Air Force is planning to relinquish ownership of the chimpanzees and is now considering bids from interested parties. Among the bidders are several groups who want to place the chimpanzees in retirement sanctuaries where they can live out the rest of their lives in peace. One such group is the Institute for Captive Chimpanzee Care, which has Dr. Jane Goodall on its Board of Directors. The Coulston Foundation has also bid on the chimpanzees, despite their negligent management record.

We, the undersigned, ask the Air Force to give all 143 chimpanzees to groups who will place them in retirement, resocialize them, and provide them with enriched environments. Please add your name to this list and forward it to friends if you believe in what it stands for. This list will be forwarded to: the President of the United States, the Vice President of the United States, Senate and House leaders, and the Pentagon.

Does this petition address a valid issue? No, because it's over. The chimps have already been turned over to the Coulston Foundation.

Does the petition include information about how the signatures are to be collected? No, it doesn't include an email address to forward it to when a certain amount of signatures are reached. It's also not very well targeted, if it's being sent to the President of the United States, the Vice President of the United States, Senate and House leaders, and the Pentagon.

Does the petition include information about how it will be used? Yes, but it addresses no current legislation.

Is this petition likely to produce any positive results? Not really. The real problem is that it takes money to care for retired chimps. The Institute for Captive Chimpanzee Care doesn't have the resources to care for that many primates.

Like most of these issues, if you really feel strongly about a cause, you should do more than forward a petition. In reality, a signature at the bottom of a check is worth a lot more than an electronic signature on an e-petition. At best, petitions raise awareness about issues we would ordinarily never hear about (like space monkey retirement issues). But if they allow us to clear our conscience with an act that is basically meaningless, then in some ways they do more harm than good.

How Can I Help?

*You ignore spam,
and so does your
congressional
representative.*

Some e-petitions direct you to a Web site, where you can get more information, sign a petition, and contact your local, state, or national representatives. This is the most useful kind of online activism, because it can actually make a difference. Petitions posted to a Web site that collects signatures get more respect than forwarded emails, which by their nature are rife with redundant entries and forgeries.

When considering a policy position, congressional offices tend to give the most attention to personal letters, visits, telephone calls, faxes, personal emails, paper petitions, form letters, postcards, and form email, according to a recent study by OMB Watch, a nonprofit group focusing on activities at the Office of Management and Budget. In other words, you ignore spam and so does your congressional representative.

So the next time a petition arrives in your inbox, you might want to delete it. But if it's about a cause you believe in, follow up on it. Find out more. Visit the Web site, if there is one. Become a member, donate time and money, and write personalized email to your government representative. It's easier than ever to get involved, and a little extra effort can make a big difference.