



## Wired for Action

Laura D'Amelio

**Cyberactivists are furiously typing their message and showing that the mouse can be a mighty weapon.**

**I**N 1971, early Greenpeacers set out with long-haired, steely determination in a worn-out boat towards Amchitka, Alaska, to oppose nuclear testing. The famous voyage brought international attention to environmental issues. Told and re-told over the years, the lyrical prose used to describe the actions of the first Greenpeace activists seems poetic and inspiring to any environmental campaigner.

But these days, the environmental movement's biggest ruckus comes from the collective clicking of a mouse or tapping of a keyboard. Organizations and campaigns of all sizes have turned to the Internet to win fast support for their causes.

Activism has never been easier. Type your name at the end of a pre-formed letter and click the send button. In the span of half an hour you can protest pollution legislation in Ontario, bear bile farming in China, Grizzly bear hunting in BC, imprisonment of journalists in Eritrea or genetically modified crops in Paraguay. Then ask the Colombian government to negotiate with indigenous peoples affected by a proposed hydroelectric dam, all before your morning fair-trade coffee.

Action alerts let supporters know through email when their help is needed, e-newsletters keep them up to date, and chat rooms give way to virtual organizational meetings. To adopt the word used frequently to refer to this new breed of Internet crusader, "cyberactivists" are responding in the thousands.

Greenpeace, pioneering again, offers a site dedicated solely to cyberactivism tools such as petitions and letter writing. Website visitors can also download action kits, letting them take campaigns to the streets with ready-made posters and leaflets.

The Internet can help the average citizen to take the reins, starting small-scale campaigns in response to local issues. In New Brunswick, residents are waging a cyberbattle against Bennett Environmental Inc.'s plans to operate a soil incinerator in Belledune designed to treat soils contaminated with PCBs, PCPs, pesticides and chlorinated organic compounds.

Environmental Studies major Allain Frigault, with his web developer brother Robert, launched their website, Stop Bennett Environmental Inc., in February of 2004.

"Our purpose was to serve as a

community of interest around an environmental cause, to promote awareness and incite action," says Frigault. "We felt that people weren't given a chance to get involved. It wasn't that people didn't care, it's just that they had no way to voice their opinions."

This website is an addition to many offline organizations and petitions already addressing this issue. Still, stopbennett.com boasts over 1400 unique visitors per month and more than 1200 other websites are linked to it. Seventy percent of the site's visitors sign the petition, garnering over 10,000 signatures to date. Petitioners from France and South Korea, mostly Canadians living abroad, have now joined a list of high profile visitors to the site which includes media outlets and federal governmental departments.

"What we tried to do is capitalize on the viral nature of the Internet," Frigault says. "Word spreads very fast, so we encouraged visitors to tell their friends about the petition and this site. This is how we built an audience."

This is also how coalitions and networks are built. One of the most dynamic aspects of the Internet is its built-in capacity for linking groups and



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causes. Groups can readily create alliances and benefit from the support of every group's members for campaigns and events.

It's that type of collaboration that Rex Turgano hopes will emerge from his site, [thegreenpages.ca](http://thegreenpages.ca). The searchable directory supplies information about environmental issues across Canada, by province, subject and upcoming events.

Turgano continuously refreshes the site to keep visitors coming back. He recently added an "action alert" section and a blog to keep users updated. It seems to be working – there were close to 200,000 visits to the site in 2004. Blogs, short for weblogs, are online personal diaries. This technology lets remote activists communicate new happenings, and helps average citizens document local environmental issues. Internet gurus and academics alike point to blogs as a potent tool for environmental advocacy.

That is, of course, if their words can result in offline actions. Knowing the technology and having a website does not automatically translate into success.

Communicopia.net is an 11-year-old online communications company that helps organizations use the Internet to connect with and engage their audiences.



Rex Turgano created [thegreenpages.ca](http://thegreenpages.ca) in 1998 to keep environmental information easily accessible to Canadians, and to encourage communities to share their news, events, and success stories.

President Jason Mogus emphasizes, "It's not just the technology – everyone's got an email newsletter these days. It's how you apply it, whether you can make it successful and engaging. This is a way for organizations to broaden their base and reach people."

He notes his company's work with the BC Chapter of the Sierra Club. A revamped website and new tools that help supporters take action are matched with an e-newsletter, *SIERRA life*, that engages readers.

"I guess the old formula was to only contact people when you had something you wanted them to take action on," says Taylor Bachrach, communications director of the Sierra Club's BC chapter. "So we are trying to broaden our scope of communications by including environmental lifestyle information with tips on ecology and smart consumerism."

Bachrach says the tactic has been working. Subscription to the newsletter, which also lets readers know about issues and campaigns, has increased from 800 to 2500 subscribers in just over a year.

But Internet approaches cannot survive alone, says Mogus. "It always has to be integrated into your offline communications – the two reinforce each other and help organizations use each medium to their best advantage."

Internet strategies bring a host of benefits to environmental campaigns. Communications are more effective and less costly. Instead of "broadcasting" your message through traditional media to a general audience, the Net allows for "narrowcasting," targeting a specific audience of supporters. The ease with which visitors can find background information and take action also helps drum up extra support for a cause. By focusing on the quality of the site and constantly adding features, web campaigners keep visitors coming back.

But every technology has its downside. The Net's accessibility and pervasiveness have many using it as a platform. "There are so many organizations and we are always competing for funding and

support and new members," says Turgano. "Some have overlapping initiatives and it's a double-edged sword. Their site helps them get their information out, but for the consumer, it's a lot of stuff to go through."

According to Mogus, "There are two sides to that story. If you're really strong in your niche, then people will find you." "But," he adds, "for the general organizations that want to reach the general public, unfortunately there are still way too many environmental groups out there. Personally, I think that's ultimately not serving the needs of the movement."

Concerns over privacy and email spam continue to trouble the online strategy. As does the "digital divide." The technologically advanced and rich North undeniably benefits from a wired world. Despite the wealth of Northern nations, computer access is not evenly distributed. And with little or no access to this resource in the South, the disparity is even more severe, where the ability to share information and organize movements is much needed but greatly hindered.

While environmental consciousness has been slowly growing in today's society, it remains to be seen if the Internet can create a thrust of interest and action that harkens back to the early days of Greenpeace voyages.

A website is, after all, ineffectual unless an interested person chooses to visit it. "The online stuff is only one component of doing grassroots works," says Bachrach. "Because the most important thing is being in personal contact with your members through events, getting out on the street and talking to people." 🗨️

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Oneworld.net provides a great resource for people interested in learning more about the challenges and successes of online activism: [www.oneworld.net/article/archive/5299](http://www.oneworld.net/article/archive/5299)