

## How 'Netroots' Is Changing the Gay Rights Movement

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For most Americans, the inauguration of Barack Obama appeared to be a cause for unbridled celebration. But for LGBT Americans, it proved bittersweet: a celebration of Obama's successful campaign, yes. But a tinged with the knowledge that much still has to be done for gay marriage and other major issues.

Many urge that LGBT campaigns for issues ranging from serving openly in the military to hate crimes would do well to emulate Obama's political campaign as a model. Aside from impressive grassroots organizing on the ground, this campaign was the first one fully to exploit the Internet as an organizing and fund-raising tool.

His unprecedented netroots-based campaign involved social network groups, online advertisements and petitions--all of which together make up the latest political buzzword, "netroots." And that, observers say, is where the future of LGBT rights lay.

The immediate reason for self-evaluation and criticism, of course, is the passage of Proposition 8 in California. The electoral public of one of the most liberal states in the country voting out gay marriage was more than a wakeup call to LGBT communities to get their act together; it was a slap in the face, a bitter splash of cold water. The question is whether gay organizations can move with the times--that is, from traditional venues into netroots.

Simply amassing email lists and gathering supporters in online social groups early in the game could have made a difference for Prop 8. According to Andrew Rasiej, online networks are important resources for recruiting donors and volunteers. Rasiej headed the Technology Advisory Council in 2004 for Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean, who first brought attention to netroots. Also, as founder of online news blogs TechPresident.com and PersonalDemocracy.com, he's something of the godfather of the whole netroots movement.

As to netroots efforts that sprung up after Prop 8's passage, they could serve as examples of what could--and probably should--have been done during the campaign before the election, not after. They include:

- [Join The Impact](#), an online protest effort for LGBT equality that resulted in hundreds of thousands of people marching in the streets across California after the passage of Prop 8.
- [The Courage Campaign](#), a netroots effort to organize California residents to push for progressive changes such as gay marriage.

### 'The Greatest Organizing Tool'

Nancy Scola emphasized that online efforts like those sites were scarce before Prop 8's passage. , Scola, who headed Internet efforts for Mark Warner's 2008 presidential campaign, looks at the success of the Obama campaign as a model. Obama was far better prepared to put netroots to work alongside grassroots. It is clear, she believes, that campaigns for LGBT rights in the future better follow the Internet president's footsteps.

Online campaigning may have another name, but it's the same principles as grassroots. Rather than being

a separate beast, it is more like what Rasiej calls "the greatest human organizing tool ever invented" because it has the ability to bring people together across geographical boundaries.

Essential to that effort is amassing of email lists and aggregating of people in Facebook groups. Visitors to campaign websites can submit their email addresses; and Facebook users can join campaign groups on the popular social networking site.

Some refer to this as "armchair activism"--the passive activism that doesn't go beyond mere clicks on the computer. For his part, Rasiej believes that getting people to click is an important first step that has great potentials. "The holy grail of online organizing is converting online enthusiasm into offline action," he says.

It's up to the campaign to ensure that online actions like Facebook groups follow through to translate virtual online support into concrete offline action. To do so, Scola said that campaigns must come up with an overall strategy before getting involved with online technologies.

She warned that if what the campaign needs to be doing has nothing to do with the Internet, "then close your computer and get to work." Scola also noted that the Obama campaign used netroots efficiently for specific purposes, such as raising money and gathering volunteers and supporters. It did not use online technologies just for looks or fancy effects.

Grassroots and netroots are interdependent, added Mike Jones, communications director for the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School. A successful campaign cannot go with either one or the other alone.

In the Obama campaign, "the online presence coupled with the field organizing of that machine is historical," said Jones, citing Join the Impact as a successful national LGBT netroots effort--one, he hastened to add, that could serve as a model for future campaigns.

### **Many Small Steps=Big Changes**

For individual netroots participants, small steps like joining a few Facebook groups can add up to palpable change if enough people do it.

One example is "Ideas for Change in America" from Change.org, a social networking site for political activists. According to Jones, 250,000 people voted on priorities for America; this in turn became collective expression of the vox populi to Obama. Jones believes that this campaign is promising to getting the president's attention as the number of participants continue to grow.

A Day Without a Gay is another example of netroots organization that occurred primarily on Facebook. This campaign urged LGBT people to take a day off from work. With a quarter of a million people joining the group on Facebook, this effort caught national attention and promoted debates about gay rights.

There has been some argument about how effective the ultimate day was. News reports and informal anecdotes indicate that not many people participated. The challenge is that in this virtual organizing sphere, you can have a million come to a website, but it doesn't mean a million will do something," said Cathy Renna of Renna Communications, a public-relations company that services many major gay organizations.

"There are pros and cons to it," she added. "I was stunned by how many people showed up at the marriage [Prop 8] protests. And they weren't the same people who usually show up at these things. It's very refreshing for someone like me who does this for a living."

Even with Day Without a Gay was more successful in the abstract, such a netroot efforts pays off anyway, Jones said, by catching the attention of mainstream media.

A Day Without a Gay was reported by ABC News and the New York Times, among others. TV and newspaper coverage is one way that netroots ultimately reaches those who are exclusively offline, mostly to older or poorer Americans. Age, however, is not an excuse for staying away from netroots.

The Obama campaign reached audience young and old. "This stereotype just hasn't born out," Scola said. Josh Levy, a writer at PersonalDemocracy.com, added that the media portrayal of netroots participants is much younger than it really is. The average age of a netroots participant is in the 40s.

Another advantage for netroots participants is that anyone can take on leadership.

Before netroots, campaign initiatives began with core people showing up to a meeting for planning. Scola

reflected that with the impending passage of Prop 8, many were galvanized to take matters into their own hands to initiate netroot protests, switching to a bottom-up approach.

Such efforts include [Equality Camp](#), a campaign for marriage equality in California, and the aforementioned [Join the Impact](#) and [Courage Campaign](#).

As activists gear up for more battles for LGBT rights, it is without doubt that netroots will have to be integral to these efforts. Emerging netroots sites also show that one can make any level and length of commitment they choose and still help affect change, and that the barrier for participation and taking on leadership is virtually nonexistent. And best of all, they're nearby and free.