



Preaching to the choir: Internet-mediated advocacy, issue public mobilization, and climate change

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Abstract

Despite the impact that Internet-mediated advocacy organizations have had on American politics over the last decade, we are still learning about how they work. This is even truer for Internet-mediated issue specialists that focus on a single issue, such as climate change. Based on interviews with key staff members of two climate change advocacy campaigns, this article examines how these organizations communicate and mobilize citizens around their issue and the underlying assumptions behind their strategies. Interviews revealed a focus on like-minded issue public mobilization and online-to-offline social movement building strategies. The paper also examines how these organizations can influence policy debates by mobilizing issue publics, shifting debates to more favorable public arenas, and reframing them in ways more favorable to their causes. Implications for the future of climate policy and Internet-mediated advocacy research are discussed.

Keywords

Climate change, framing, Internet-mediated advocacy, issue publics, Keystone XL, mobilization, online-to-offline, public arenas, social movements, 350.org

Introduction

In late 2011, it was widely assumed that President Obama would approve the Keystone XL project, a US\$7b pipeline that would run nearly 2000 miles and connect Canada's oil sands to refineries near Houston, Texas, and the Gulf of Mexico. The State

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Department, which had primary responsibility over the project, had already approved a portion, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had said she was 'inclined' to approve the project (Hovey, 2010; Perdomo and Vieira, 2012). Despite serious concerns from environmental groups and members of Congress about the project's impact on local ecosystems and global climate change (Casey-Lefkowitz, 2010), conventional wisdom about the pipeline's impending approval was so widespread that a poll of energy industry and policy insiders yielded a near-unanimous consensus that the president would approve the project by early 2012 at the latest (Belogolova, 2011). However, in December 2011, President Obama decided to postpone his decision until 2013. In January 2012, after congressional Republicans forced its hand, the State Department denied the developer's permit application.

The months preceding the president's decision saw a surge of anti-pipeline activism led by relatively new, climate-centered advocacy organizations such as 350.org (pronounced three-fifty-dot-org). In August 2011, nearly 900 activists were arrested in front of the White House (Koch, 2011). Two months later, an estimated 10,000 activists encircled the White House in a final attempt to convince President Obama to reject the pipeline (Graves and Suart, 2011). In February 2012, when the Senate unsuccessfully took up legislation to resurrect the pipeline, supporters of 35 advocacy organizations—including 350.org—sent more than 800,000 emails to senators urging them to reject the bill (350.org, 2012). The pipeline's temporary demise was a welcome development for activists after Congress' repeated failures to pass comprehensive climate legislation.

Although it is very difficult to ascribe direct causal relationships between interest group mobilization and policy outcomes (Baumgartner, 2009), the grassroots mobilization against the pipeline is presumed to have been an important factor in the postponement of the Keystone XL project. If so, it is one of the more successful advocacy efforts led by a new crop of organizations created in recent years specifically to advocate for aggressive solutions to climate change. They include groups such as 350.org, the 1Sky campaign (pronounced one-sky) that merged with 350.org in April 2011, the Energy Action Coalition, the TckTckTck campaign, and others. These organizations can be seen as a subset of a new type of political organization that practices Internet-mediated advocacy. They are characterized by their nimble nature, their ability to decouple fundraising from the definition of membership, and the hybridity of their advocacy repertoires, including both online and offline social movement-type actions (Chadwick, 2007; Karpf, 2012).

Despite their impact on American politics over the last decade, we are still learning how Internet-mediated advocacy organizations influence policy. This article analyses how these organizations communicate about climate change, how they mobilize citizens to take action, and the underlying assumptions behind their strategies. It aims to expand our understanding of how certain types of Internet-mediated advocacy organizations work, and explore how these new players in the advocacy community may already be influencing policy.

Interviews conducted with current and former key staff from 350.org and the 1Sky campaign show how the perception of a large-scale societal failure to deal with climate change has shaped the strategic assumptions of these organizations, and how their belief in the power of the Internet as a tool for political communication and mobilization has

molded their advocacy practices. I selected these campaigns because of the prominent roles they have played in recent climate change and related policy battles, such as the Keystone XL campaign. In addition, I provide a brief analysis of the Keystone XL campaign and discuss the role that organizations like 350.org can play in the advocacy ecosystem.

A changing issue advocacy landscape

As Internet use has grown, scholars have been exploring how online communication technologies are changing the nature of collective action and political organization (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Bimber et al., 2009; Davis, 2010; De Zuniga et al., 2010; Earl and Kimport, 2011; Fisher and Boekkooi, 2010; Nielsen, 2011). Arguments about the impact of online communication technologies on collective action have typically fallen into two camps: those who argue that use of the Internet in the advocacy process merely ‘supersizes’ the practice of activism, and those who argue that it can fundamentally change the process—what Earl and Kimport (2011) call ‘theory 2.0’ effects.

Writing about the changing American issue advocacy landscape, Karpf (2012) offers a different argument: online technologies are fostering new kinds of advocacy organizations. These Internet-mediated organizations display a hybrid mobilization model most commonly associated with MoveOn.org, which ‘sometimes behaves like an interest group, sometimes like a social movement, sometimes like the wing of a traditional party during an election campaign’ (Chadwick, 2007: 284). This model stands in contrast with the ‘armchair activism’ model exhibited by organizations founded during the US advocacy group boom of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which encouraged individual donations to support expert lobbying in Washington, D.C., or low-cost activities such as letter-writing, but little else (Skocpol, 2003).

Karpf (2012) divides this new breed of Internet-mediated organization into three categories: issue generalists, online communities of interest, and neo-federated organizations. Issue generalists communicate primarily via email and maintain sparse websites (e.g., MoveOn.org); online communities of interests are web-based gatherings of individuals that contribute content to these communities (e.g., the progressive community site Daily Kos); and neo-federated organizations retain a semblance of the chapter-based structure of traditional federated organizations, but focus on offering online tools for offline action (e.g., Democracy for America, founded by former presidential candidate Howard Dean in 2004). Each type of Internet-mediated organization exhibits a dominant communication model: issue generalists exhibit an organization-to-member/online model; online communities of interest display a member-to-member/online model; and neo-federated groups exhibit a member-to-member/offline model (Karpf, 2012: 19).

The organizations featured in this study fall most neatly into a subset Karpf calls ‘Internet-mediated issue specialists’, which share many other characteristics with issue generalists except for their issue specialization (2012: 49). One important characteristic that Internet-mediated issue specialists do not fully share with their generalist counterparts is an ability to engage in ‘headline chasing’—the practice of building advocacy campaigns around issues or topics that are receiving significant media attention at a particular time. Because their niche issues may not receive as much attention as the ones

that attract headline chasing, specialist groups often try to bring attention to their issues through communication and mobilization strategies, such as framing and dramatic appeals, that shift issues from less favorable arenas to more favorable ones where public pressure can make a difference (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Nisbet and Huge, 2007).

Where do these climate-centered, Internet-mediated specialists fall within the environmental advocacy ecosystem? Since the US environmental organization ecosystem was essentially set in place in the 1970s, any organizations founded after this period would have had to fit themselves into whatever—usually narrower—issue niches remained open (Bosso, 2005). This would seem to be the case with climate organizations, except for the fact that the scale of climate change makes it much more than a narrow issue niche. There is an overwhelming consensus among scientists and other experts about the potentially catastrophic impact of climate change on human beings and ecosystems, as well as the need to change both individual behavior and governments' policies in order to avert the worst anticipated effects of this phenomenon (Houghton et al., 2001). Climate change has been referred to as a 'wicked' policy problem so complex that no one solution at any one level of government or society could fully address it (Hulme, 2009).

Despite this widespread consensus, efforts to deal with climate change at the US federal and international levels have repeatedly failed or fallen short of expectations. Since 2003, seven climate change bills have been introduced in Congress, but only one was approved by the House of Representatives, and all seven have died in the Senate (Layzer, 2011: 368–377). In addition, the Senate never ratified the Kyoto Protocol that was adopted internationally in 1997, and President Obama was severely criticized by environmentalists such as Bill McKibben for the role the US played during the UN Climate Change Conference in 2009, where a successor to the Kyoto treaty was being negotiated (McKibben, 2009). Even state-based efforts to combat climate change in the US are under attack. For example, New Jersey governor Chris Christie pulled his state out of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) to which it had previously belonged along with nine other Eastern Seaboard states (Eilperin, 2011).

Social movements tend to emerge either because pre-existing organizations and social structures cannot reach agreement to solve a conflict, or because they do not wish to pay attention to a particular social problem (McCarthy and Zald, 1990). The perception that there has been a systemic failure across various levels of government and society to deal with climate change effectively has fueled the belief among activists that a social movement is needed to deal with this global threat.

Issue public mobilization

Concern over climate change and the best ways to communicate about it has led researchers to study Americans' beliefs and attitudes about the issue in greater detail. Extensive audience segmentation analyses on attitudes about climate change have yielded six overarching audience segments, also known as the Six Americas of Climate Change, which are illustrated in Figure 1: The Alarmed (18% of the population), the Concerned (33%), the Cautious (19%), the Disengaged (12%), Doubtful (11%) and the Dismissive (7%) (Leiserowitz et al., 2009).

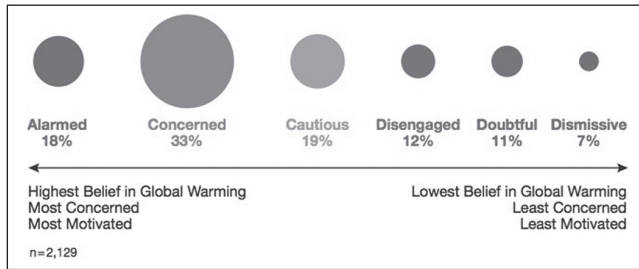


Figure 1. Proportion of the US adult population in the Six Americas.

Source: Leiserowitz et al. (2009) Global warming's six Americas 2009: An audience segmentation analysis. Yale Project on Climate Change and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication.

In this study I focus on the first segment, the Alarmed, which is most engaged in the issue of global warming. They are convinced it is happening, that it is human-caused, and that it is an urgent threat. The Alarmed are 'already making changes in their own lives and support an aggressive national response' (Leiserowitz et al., 2009). They tend to be liberal Democrats, more often female, older middle-aged (55–64 years old), well-educated, and upper income. Unfortunately, only a quarter of them have contacted a public official regarding the issue (Maibach et al., 2011).

This audience segment essentially constitutes an issue public around climate change. 'Issue publics' follow specific issues more closely than the rest of the population and exert political pressure on decision makers (Key, 1963). The larger the issue public is, the greater the likelihood that its policy preferences will be adopted. Although the complexity of climate change and the broad-based consensus it would require to pass strong legislation would probably require an increase in opinion intensity around the issue (Nisbet, 2011), mobilizing as large a share of the climate issue public as possible should be a critical part of the process as well. It is therefore in the interest of climate advocates and other stakeholders to find ways to grow and mobilize this issue public.

Since the Alarmed have already arrived at a strong consensus on the issue, efforts aimed at 'consensus mobilization'—the process through which a social movement tries to gather support for its positions (Klandermans, 1984)—are hardly necessary. Instead, Internet-enabled specialist groups are free to focus on 'action mobilization', which Klandermans (1984: 586) defines as 'the process by which an organization in a social movement calls up people to participate'. Because of their exclusive climate focus, hybrid and flexible mobilization models, and social movement orientation, Internet-mediated specialist groups may be best positioned to maximize the political mobilization of the Alarmed.

This ability to mobilize the climate issue public would include the ability to communicate about the issue in ways that lead to mobilization. While there has been much communication research in recent years on how different aspects of framing can lead to changes in opinions and attitudes about climate change (Maibach et al., 2010; Nisbet, 2009), social movements scholarship may provide a better window into how framing can impact mobilization.

Snow and Benford (1988) identify three core framing tasks that movement actors must achieve to mobilize supporters: diagnostic framing, which identifies a problem and attributes blame; prognostic framing, which proposes solutions to the problem; and motivational framing, which elaborates a call to action that goes beyond diagnosis and prognosis. Movements undertake these tasks in order to achieve 'frame alignment,' or 'the linkage of individual and SMO [social movement organization] interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values, and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary' (Snow et al., 1986). Despite the high degree of consensus among the Alarmed regarding climate change, 'agreement about the causes and solutions to a particular problem does not automatically produce corrective action' (Snow and Benford, 1988: 202). We would therefore expect Internet-enabled climate groups to focus on motivational framing in order to achieve maximum action mobilization (Klandermans, 1984).

What communication and mobilization strategies would be most effective among a segment of the public that is already deeply concerned about climate change and believes some sort of large-scale collective action must be taken to avert disaster? Staff members at the climate-centered organizations interviewed for this study have very clear ideas about this question.

Interviews with 350.org and ISky staff

I chose my interview subjects because of the key roles they have played in one of three organizational areas: online/offline communications, field organization, and overall strategic leadership. Gillian Caldwell (ISky) and May Boeve (350.org) were chosen for their roles as campaign/executive directors of their organizations. Jon Warnow (350.org) and Garth Moore (ISky) were chosen for their roles as Internet directors. Kimberly Fountain (ISky) and Phil Aroneanu (350.org) were chosen for their field organizing leadership roles. Ada Aroneanu (ISky) was chosen for her prominent role as a field organizer. Alex Bea (350.org and ISky) was a key member of both organizations' online teams. Boeve, Phil Aroneanu, and Warnow are also co-founders of 350.org, which gives them a unique perspective into the campaign.

Respondents were asked open-ended questions about their organizations' strategic assumptions and aims, their communication and mobilization objectives, and the tactics they use to achieve their strategic ends. All interviews were conducted between April and June 2012. Although there are limitations to this method (Saukko, 2003), I judged this to be the best method for gathering rich data about the strategic assumptions behind the communication and mobilization tactics deployed by these organizations.

Background

The ISky campaign and 350.org shared common origins and overlapped significantly in the climate advocacy world. Both organizations were launched in the wake of the Step It Up national days of climate action in 2007 (see Fisher and Boekkooi, 2010, for more background on Step It Up), and received significant financial support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund's Sustainable Development program (Bailey, 2011). Both organizations

have also shared leadership at the highest levels. Environmental author and 350.org co-founder Bill McKibben was on the 1Sky board of directors from its inception to the April 2011 merger, while former 1Sky board president Betsy Taylor and other board members belonged to 350.org's US Advisory Council as of February 2013. In addition, several 1Sky staff members remained with 350.org after the two groups merged in April 2011.

Despite their similarities, close collaboration, and ultimate merger, the organizations had different historical origins, and between 2008 and 2011 focused on different yet complementary priorities. The 1Sky campaign was created to advance '[b]old federal action in the United States that can anchor the global movement to stop global warming and simultaneously generate millions of new jobs and economic security' (1Sky, 2008). It had three specific and ambitious policy goals: (a) reducing global warming pollution at least 25% below 1990 levels by 2020 and at least 80% below 1990 levels by 2050; (b) achieving a moratorium on the construction of new coal power plants; and (c) creating 5 million 'green jobs' (1Sky, 2008). Policy ambition was precisely one of the goals behind the campaign's creation, according to former director Gillian Caldwell:

Too many of the policy proposals had been catered to the political reality in Washington DC, so the goal was, through our grassroots and field operation and through a multisectoral approach, [to] create more space for a more aggressive policy to halt global warming. (Personal communication, April 30, 2012)

Bill McKibben and a cohort of six students at Vermont's Middlebury College founded 350.org after the Step It Up actions of 2007 in order to build 'a global grassroots movement to solve the climate crisis' (350.org, n.d.-a). US campaign director and co-founder Phil Aroneanu recalls that the organization had its roots in local climate advocacy:

We launched a bunch of campus-based efforts that then sort of transitioned into a few really basic campaigns that were state-based in Vermont: a march, a sit-in and a few distributed-style actions throughout the state. And eventually that led to us honing the idea for this campaign called Step It Up... We launched 350.org about 9 months later, after going to the UN climate talks in Bali, Indonesia. (Personal communication, May 15, 2012)

Although 350.org has never spelled out a detailed policy platform—instead it endorsed the 1Sky platform, along with more than 600 other organizations—the very name of the group conveys policy ambition. The organization took its name from a study co-authored by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) Goddard Institute for Space Studies director and renowned climate scientist James Hansen. The authors argued that CO₂ levels in the atmosphere would need to be reduced from their (at the time) current level of 385 parts per million (ppm) to at most 350 ppm to avert the worst effects of climate change (Hansen et al., 2008).

Mobilizing climate publics

There was a near-unanimous consensus among respondents about the ideal target of both organizations' communication and mobilization efforts: individuals who are already deeply concerned about climate change and who think collective action is necessary to

solve the crisis—in other words, the Alarmed issue public. Colloquial versions of this concept, such as ‘preaching to the choir’ or reaching for the ‘low-hanging fruit’, came up constantly in conversation. May Boeve, 350.org’s executive director and co-founder, said:

Our most consistent audience is the community of people who care about climate change and see it as a problem and are committed to do something about it. Yes, there’s an issue of preaching to the choir, but imagine if you could have the choir all singing from the same song sheet. (Personal communication, April 25, 2012)

Former 1Sky Internet director Garth Moore confirmed this commitment to recruiting and mobilizing those who were already sympathetic to its goals:

We were definitely trying to reach people who believed climate change is real and is happening but were more the idealists in the sense that strong policy and preventive measures could slow or deter the rates of climate change. We went after the low-hanging fruit of people who were already sold on our issue. (Personal communication, April 19, 2012)

Besides a shared sense of alarm about global warming and a desire for large-scale action to address the problem, it is an open question how closely the supporter bases of 1Sky and 350.org mirror the demographic traits of the Alarmed segment. Neither organization has conducted a thorough survey of its supporter base. When asked about the demographic composition of 350.org’s base, Web director and co-founder Jon Warnow provided some data that was gathered by matching a small portion of 350.org’s email list to public records and other databases. This data mirrors some of the traits associated with the Alarmed climate public, such as the predominance of women and older middle-aged individuals. Unfortunately, the scant data and non-random nature of the matching procedure cannot tell us with certainty how closely the demographics of 350.org’s supporter base mirror the Alarmed climate public’s demographics.

When asked about the demographic snapshot of the typical 1Sky supporter, Moore said: ‘There were two user models for 1Sky: a mom or older woman, environmentalist, well-educated, low-moderate income, past [activism] experience... The other model is a Step It Up model: post-college or younger activist, environmentalist, activist, low-income’ (Personal communication, June 21, 2012). The limited data collected by both organizations hints at similarities between their supporter bases and the Alarmed climate public, but more thorough research is needed to ascertain this.

The targeting of the Alarmed climate public by both organizations is closely related to a shared belief in a theory of change that holds the creation of a climate change movement as critical to achieving comprehensive solutions to the crisis.¹ Many of the interviews revealed a sense that something other than traditional issue advocacy—for example, ‘armchair activism’ as described by Skocpol (2003)—was necessary given the scale of the problem. Former 1Sky leadership coordinator Ada Aroneanu said: ‘It was going to take a movement of people to rise up and demand change from people in positions of power before change would actually happen’ (Personal communication, May 14, 2012). Phil Aroneanu (Ada’s brother) noted that many of 350.org’s student-founders were deeply influenced by a class taught by Middlebury College economics professor

and climate activist Jonathan Isham called *Climate Change and Social Movements*, where students read about the US civil rights movement and revolutionary movements around the world.

Internet-mediated climate advocacy

The organizations profiled here exhibit many of the characteristics displayed by most Internet-mediated advocacy organizations, such as low overhead and a hybrid mobilization model (Chadwick, 2007; Karpf, 2012). The hybridity seems even more pronounced at the level of issue specialist organizations such as 350.org and 1Sky. Whereas the large organizations and communities that Karpf studied fall more or less neatly into three categories—Internet-mediated issue generalists, online communities of interest, and neo-federated organizations—the issue specialists profiled here are harder to classify. Sometimes they behave like the generalists, other times like communities of interest, and still other times like neo-federated organizations.

Like all three types listed above, 1Sky and 350.org exhibit relatively low budgets and overhead; 1Sky averaged 15 full-time staff members during its three years of existence, while 350.org's US staff consisted of 26 members—37 including international staff—as of June 2012 (1Sky, 2008, 2009, 2010; 350.org, n.d.-b). Alex Bea, who worked on both organizations' online teams, saw a connection between 350.org's low budget and its nimble strategies, including its pervasive use of art throughout its campaigns:

I think that [the emphasis on art] came from the fact that 350.org was always working low-budget, and the question was, 'how do we get attention, how do we get media, and how do we inspire people to be a part of this?' And probably the first discussions weren't about art and creativity, but about 'how do we inspire people to get involved?' (Personal communication, May 17, 2012)

In addition to having much in common with Internet-mediated generalists, such as their heavy reliance on email to communicate with supporters, both organizations have displayed the deep commitment to online-to-offline action and to self-sustaining local grassroots organizing characteristic of neo-federated organizations, as well as a reliance on blogs and other tools in ways similar to online communities of interest.

Perhaps the most ambitious manifestation of this commitment to local, self-sustaining grassroots organizing was 1Sky's Climate Precinct Captain (CPC) program that aimed to support climate organizers and volunteers in each of the country's 300,000 electoral precincts (1Sky, 2008), and was connected to 'The Climate Network' program. In 2008, 1Sky and three other climate groups—Clean Energy Works, the Energy Action Coalition, and Focus the Nation—began developing The Climate Network, an online community through which all four organizations would engage their supporters (Moore et al., 2010). The goals of the project were to give local groups and organizers online tools to support their offline work, and to document and map the growing climate change movement online for legislators and other decision makers. Ultimately, the program did not meet expectations and was abandoned. Moore et al. (2010) gave several reasons for the project's demise, including a lack of consultation with intended audiences; the technology vendor's inability to keep promises about the platform's capabilities; changing technical

requirements from the partner organizations; and frustration with the platform's user interface and functionality among users and even staff within the partner organizations (Moore et al., 2010).

1Sky's regional coordinators program, which provided modest stipends to highly engaged volunteers and was nurtured by a dedicated email communication stream separate from the rest of 1Sky's list, was more successful. In 2010, 1Sky recruited and trained 13 regional coordinators, who in turn recruited and trained other volunteers in their regions. Kimberly Fountain, former field manager at 1Sky, said:

In order to have a larger impact, it's good for us to have a volunteer become a leader vs. a staff person because when volunteers see their peers take on a leadership role they are more likely to take on a leadership role themselves. They're in the states, so they know what's happening on the ground, they know their elected officials. (Personal communication, May 10, 2012)

350.org has shown an equally firm commitment to local, self-sustaining grassroots organizing. Its most visible examples have been large-scale, global days of action, such as its original International Day of Climate Action on October 24, 2009, and the Global Work Party of October 10, 2010, which were facilitated by online event management tools. 350.org has since enhanced this model by incorporating some aspects of 1Sky's leadership training program after the merger.

Despite this shared commitment, interviews revealed differences in organizing approaches between the two organizations. Whereas Fountain talked about 1Sky's adherence to the concept of the 'ladder of engagement', 350.org staff reported no such adherence. Advocacy professionals commonly understand the 'ladder of engagement' as the process by which an activist is recruited into higher levels of activism by first being given the opportunity to carry out tasks that require less effort. Regarding the ladder of engagement concept, Warnow said:

Sometimes, people will never get on the ladder because the rung they're presented with seems too small and ineffectual, especially [because] with a problem that is as big and serious as climate change, it's really hard for some people to say, 'I really care deeply about this issue, I understand this is an urgent crisis, I'm going to tweet this thing that's going to make it all better.' (Personal communication, May 18, 2012)

In addition to a commitment to online-to-offline grassroots organizing, both organizations have relied heavily on online communication tools such as blogs and social media to build and maintain community in ways more closely associated with online communities of interest. Says Moore:

With the blog we'd have partner voices, where we'd have the youth blogs like It's Getting Hot in Here, or younger staff members or college kids writing...occasionally we'd get them from organizers or moms. It was fortunate that our blog intertwined those elements so well together. (Personal communication, April 19, 2012)

These interviews paint a portrait of sister climate advocacy organizations focused on building a climate change movement by mobilizing those most concerned about the

issue. They have taken advantage of the Internet's ability to lower costs and barriers of entry for political communication and mobilization, and used this flexibility to deploy a hybrid arsenal of tactics that emphasizes online-to-offline grassroots organizing to achieve their goals. Below I offer a brief analysis of the Keystone XL pipeline campaign to discuss how Internet-mediated issue specialists such as 350.org can influence policy debates.

Keystone XL: Arena-shifting, drama, and counter-framing

Complementary models of the rise and fall of social problems and media attention cycles can help us understand how Internet-mediated advocacy organizations influence policy. Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) argue that the definition of social problems happens in specific public arenas, such as the presidency, Congress, and the media, among others. All public arenas have different 'carrying capacities' or 'bandwidth' limits. The number of potential problems, coupled with bandwidth limits, results in competition among problems for attention. This encourages activists and other political operatives to cast issues in dramatic terms, coupling facts with emotional rhetoric.

Writing on the emergence of science debates in the media, Nisbet and Huye (2007) suggest that interest groups can alter the direction of policy making by boosting the level of attention the media pays to issues and by morphing the image of the issue in the press. For status quo players, it is best to limit the scope of participation in policymaking to less democratic arenas, such as regulatory agencies. However, for disadvantaged groups, it is best to expand the scope of participation to overtly democratic arenas, such as Congress or the presidency. The fate of issues may rest on their advocates' ability to compete for attention in multiple public arenas that have limited attention bandwidth. In addition, their particular issue may be debated in unfavorable arenas, necessitating a shift in advocacy strategies that involve the public more directly in order to move the issue to more favorable arenas.

Available evidence indicates that 350.org and their allies may have affected the course of the Keystone XL debate by mobilizing a portion of the climate issue public in order to increase media attention to the impending decision, shift it from an administrative arena—the State Department—to an overtly political one—the White House—and make its outcome susceptible to public pressure.² They tried to achieve action mobilization through frame alignment by reframing the Keystone XL project and employing dramatic advocacy tactics, which heightened and diversified media attention to include more political reporting.

Figure 2 shows a significant spike in media attention for the Keystone XL debate between August and November 2011 that coincides with a period of heightened activism by 350.org and its allies. Markers on the chart indicate how the spike in coverage of the Keystone XL project coincides with increased media mentions of 350.org and Bill McKibben, its co-founder and chief spokesperson.³

Drawing media attention to the Keystone XL project through civil disobedience was one of the pillars of 350.org's strategy to stop the project. After concluding that the forces arrayed in favor of the pipeline were too powerful to take on through conventional

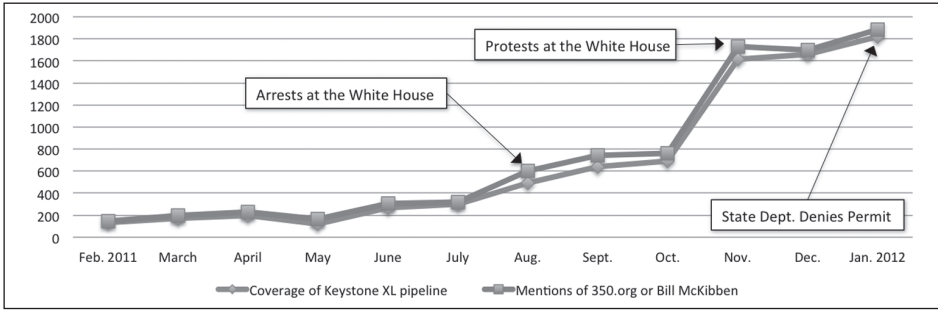


Figure 2. Keystone XL news coverage, February 2011–January 2012.

advocacy, Bill McKibben and 10 other activists sent an open letter to the environmental community that read in part, ‘It’s time to stop letting corporate power make the most important decisions our planet faces. We don’t have the money to compete...but we do have our bodies’ (Mayer, 2011).

This letter set in motion the direct action and civil disobedience campaign to come. Because of the personal sacrifice involved and the connection between the strategy and the highly regarded US civil rights movement, the nearly 900 arrests in front of the White House in August 2011 recast the Keystone XL debate in dramatic terms of the sort theorized by scholars as being often necessary to bring attention to social problems (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Nisbet and Huges, 2007). The encircling of the White House in early November 2011 may have had a similar effect on the attention cycle for the issue. Targeting the White House may have also helped remove the decision from the administrative arena of the State Department, over which activists had little influence, and drew little attention from the political press, relocating it to the explicitly political arena of the presidency. While the formal decision still resided with the State Department, for all practical purposes the decision now rested with President Obama.

In addition, 350.org and its allies countered the prevailing framing about the Keystone XL project with motivational frames of their own. Prevailing frames about the project had emphasized its alleged job creation potential—an attractive frame during an economic downturn, particularly when echoed by both business interests such as the US Chamber of Commerce and unions such as the Laborers’ International Union of North America (Mayer, 2011; Restuccia, 2012). Anti-pipeline activists countered by deploying a public accountability frame, which can be defined as ‘policy being either in the public interest or serving special interests, emphasizing issues of control, transparency, participation, responsiveness, or ownership’. They also used a catastrophic ‘Pandora’s Box’ frame, which can be defined as ‘a need for precaution or action in the face of possible catastrophe and out-of-control consequences’ (Nisbet, 2009: 18).

The approach was three-pronged: deploy tried-and-true catastrophic framing to mobilize the Alarmed climate public; hold corporations accountable for how the pipeline would exacerbate climate change and harm local ecosystems; and hold the president accountable for the promises he made to supporters regarding clean energy and climate change during the 2008 campaign. The Pandora’s Box frame is evident in comments

McKibben made repeatedly during the Keystone XL campaign. McKibben often cited a conversation he had with NASA climate scientist James Hansen in which McKibben asked Hansen about the consequences of allowing the pipeline to be built. Hansen replied, 'Essentially, it's game over for the planet' (Mayer, 2011). The 'game over' quote was later seen in signs carried by protesters in front of the White House.

In the *New Yorker*, Jane Mayer succinctly lays out the public accountability frame that 350.org and allied groups used on President Obama to pressure him to halt the pipeline:

McKibben met across the street with a senior White House official. He said that although the environmental movement had supported the President, wherever he went now demonstrators would be there, too. 'We're not going to do you the favor of attacking you,' he said. 'We're going to do the much more dangerous thing of saying we need to hear from the Obama who said those beautiful things in the campaign. We expect him to do what he promised.' (Mayer, 2011)

The two-pronged public accountability framing approach was echoed in the imagery that could be seen during the various direct actions between August and November 2011. For example, protesters were often seen with signs that said simply 'NOXL' in which the letter 'O' consisted of the ubiquitous Obama 2008 campaign logo.

The president's statement supporting a delay of the Keystone XL permit reflected some of the frames discussed above (WhiteHouse.gov, 2011). The statement cited the fact that the decision 'could affect the health and safety of the American people as well as the environment', partly echoing the catastrophic frame as well as the public health frame some advocates had deployed. The president's assertion that the decision 'should be guided by an open, transparent process that is informed by the best available science and the voices of the American people' also echoed the public accountability frame. By helping to shift the battle for the pipeline's fate to a more favorable arena through the use of motivational framing and dramatic mobilization strategies, 350.org and their allies may have successfully influenced the course of the Keystone XL debate.

Conclusion

I have focused here on Internet-mediated issue specialists as a subset of Internet-mediated advocacy organizations. Although the organizations I studied seemed to have most in common with Internet-mediated generalists, they also exhibited a propensity to borrow freely from the repertoire of all three major types identified by Karpf (2012). Perhaps because of its position as an issue specialist, 350.org, in particular, exhibited an inclination to attempt to *generate* headlines around different aspects of climate change instead of chasing them, as a generalist organization might.

This study also begins to map the budding climate advocacy ecosystem. In that respect, 1Sky and 350.org shared a determination to help build a full-blown social movement to tackle climate change, anchored in a belief that the system was essentially non-responsive to conventional advocacy. They also shared a belief in the power of the Internet to help turn members of the climate issue public into committed, long-term activists.

Finally, I have used the Keystone XL pipeline case to examine how this new generation of advocacy organizations can bring about change through various advocacy and communication strategies, including the effective use of motivational framing to mobilize sympathetic issue publics and draw media attention to issues that would otherwise go unnoticed by the political media.

Further research is needed in each of these areas. For example, it remains unclear which types of frames would be most successful in helping to grow and mobilize sympathetic issue publics to take political action. Experimental work that measures individual framing effects may help answer this question. Myers et al. (2012) conducted a study in which a focus on the public health dimensions of climate change, in comparison to either an environmental or national security framing, induced feelings of greater hope among segments of the public, while diffusing reactions of anger among those strongly dismissive of the issue. This type of research offers useful insight on how organizations like 350.org can grow and diversify the size of the climate change issue public.

The interaction between Internet-mediated generalists and specialists and their 'legacy' counterparts should also be explored in detail. How does each type of organization contribute to policy changes in the current advocacy environment? When and how do they cooperate or compete with each other? A detailed examination of the climate advocacy ecosystem, including the relationship between well-established environmental players, new think tanks, and educational and advocacy groups is equally necessary. Comparative studies that examine the similarities and differences in communication and advocacy practices between Internet-mediated climate specialists and so-called 'legacy' environmental organizations would also contribute to our understanding of both the emerging climate advocacy ecosystem and Internet-mediated specialist groups.

Finally, this study suggests that climate specialist groups have eschewed alternative strategies in favor of an action mobilization strategy to achieve their goals. Will such mobilization be sufficient to bring about large-scale solutions to the climate crisis, or is it merely a necessary condition? While the mobilization of the climate issue public appears to have had a positive effect on the campaign to stop the Keystone XL pipeline, the broader implications of such a strategy are unclear. The 'wicked' nature of climate change suggests that more inclusive forms of democratic decision making—e.g. deliberative or participatory democracy (Price, 2008)—and additional consensus mobilization (Klandermans, 1984) will be necessary to achieve a consensus broad enough to support comprehensive solutions. Increased climate issue public mobilization, however, may reinforce patterns of motivated reasoning (Lodge and Taber, 2000) and worsen existing polarization around climate change (Dunlap and McCright, 2008), making the process of enacting solutions more difficult. If this is the case, it remains to be seen whether the gap between issue public mobilization and more inclusive alternatives can be bridged successfully.

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Notes

1. I use the term ‘theory of change’ here as it is used within the advocacy community: an articulation of a strategy that could plausibly lead to desired changes in policy or norms. See Klugman (2011) for an academic treatment of the concept.
2. While this analysis emphasizes 350.org’s leadership role in the Keystone XL protests, many other groups, including Tar Sands Action and a large coalition that included so-called ‘legacy’ organizations, such as the Sierra Club, and prominent individuals participated in the protests as well.
3. I generated the chart by searching Factiva for the terms ‘Keystone XL pipeline’, ‘350.org’, and ‘Bill McKibben’, including all sources but limited to the period between February 2011 and January 2012 and to US coverage.

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