Climate change advocacy online: Theories of change, target audiences, and online strategy

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Abstract

Widespread adoption of the Internet has transformed how most U.S. political advocacy organizations operate, but perhaps more important has been the formation of new types of advocacy organizations. These 'Internet-mediated advocacy organizations' tend to have smaller, geographically dispersed and networked staffs, behave as hybrids of traditional political organizations, and emphasize the use of online tools for offline action. The climate change debate has spurred formation of many such organizations—including 350.org—that now advocate for climate action alongside legacy/environmental organizations. How do these organizations differ from their legacy/environmental counterparts? What does their rise mean for climate change political advocacy? I explore these and other questions through in-depth interviews with top online strategists and other staffers at Environmental Defense Fund, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, Greenpeace USA, Energy Action Coalition, 1Sky, and 350.org. Interviews revealed broad agreement among Internet-mediated/climate groups regarding core strategic assumptions about climate advocacy, but some divergence among legacy/environmental organizations. They also revealed connections between these assumptions, audience segment targeting, and strategic use of the Internet for advocacy. I discuss implications for the future of U.S. climate advocacy.
Introduction

In June 1988, Dr. James Hansen, then-head of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, told a U.S. Senate committee that scientists were ‘99% certain’ that rising global temperatures seen in recent years were caused by the accumulation of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere—the by-products of increased industrial activity over the last century (Shabecoff, 1988). More recently, climate change has been linked to extreme weather events such as heat waves, droughts, floods, cyclones, and wildfires that can disrupt water and food supplies, damage infrastructure, and negatively affect human health and well-being in numerous ways (IPCC, 2014). But 25 years after Dr Hansen’s testimony, comprehensive efforts to deal with climate change at federal and international levels have repeatedly failed or fallen short of expectations.¹

Increased attention to climate change in the public sphere—and the policy shortcomings associated with it—have coincided with the Internet’s emergence as a critical platform for political information, expression, and participation. This trend has enabled the formation of new types of political organizations in the U.S. that would not have been viable without the Internet’s emergence as a key communication platform. These ‘Internet-mediated advocacy organizations’ (Karpf, 2012) display communication and mobilization models most commonly associated with MoveOn.org (Chadwick, 2007; Karpf, 2012). Concern about climate change has driven the establishment of several such organizations that specialize in climate advocacy in the U.S. They include groups such as the 1Sky campaign (pronounced one-sky) the Energy Action Coalition (EAC), and 350.org (pronounced three-fifty-dot-org), which has been leading a (so far) successful campaign against the Keystone XL pipeline (Hestres, 2014).

The emergence of these new advocacy groups begs questions about the future of American climate advocacy. How are these new organizations truly different from their legacy/environmental counterparts? How are they similar? How do they use the Internet, one of the most important political communication and mobilization platforms today, for climate advocacy, and what drives these decisions?

I explore these and other questions through in-depth interviews with top online strategists and other staffers at four legacy/environmental organizations: Environmental Defense Fund, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, and Greenpeace USA; and three Internet-mediated/climate groups: Energy Action Coalition, 1Sky, and 350.org. These interviews revealed that Internet-mediated/climate groups share similar theories of political change, while legacy/environmental organizations displayed more diversity of theories. They also revealed connections between these strategic assumptions, audience segment targeting, and strategic use of the Internet for advocacy.

¹ In June 2014, President Obama announced an EPA plan to regulate carbon emissions from coal power plants. The regulations were prompted by a U.S. Supreme Court decision that found the EPA has authority to regulate greenhouse gases (Massachusetts v. EPA, "Massachusetts et al v. Environmental Protection Agency et al.,” 2007). Several of the organizations featured in this article participated in the lawsuit against the EPA. These regulations will not be finalized before June 2015, and face opposition from Congress, several states, and the fossil fuel industry.
Public Opinion and Climate Change

It is worth establishing where American public opinion stands on climate change before discussing U.S. climate advocacy in greater detail. Although a majority of Americans (64%) believes that climate change is happening, and those who do are more certain of this fact while those who do not are becoming less certain, this majority lags far behind the nearly unanimous consensus of the scientific community (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, Feinberg, & Rosenthal, 2014b). Opinion lags even farther behind the scientific consensus when it comes to causality. Only 44% of Americans believe climate change is caused by human activity, while the rest do not or are not sure. Perhaps most distressing for activists is the fact that, while 55% of Americans are worried about climate change, only 15% are ‘very worried’ (Leiserowitz et al., 2014b).

Extensive audience segmentation analyses on attitudes about climate change have revealed six distinct segments known as the Six Americas of Climate Change: the Alarmed (16% of the population), the Concerned (27%), the Cautious (23%), the Disengaged (5%), Doubtful (12%) and the Dismissive (15%) (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, Feinberg, & Rosenthal, 2014a). Given that even the most affluent Internet-mediated/climate or legacy/environmental organizations do not have unlimited resources, we would expect organizations to focus the bulk of their communication efforts to mobilizing the Alarmed, which is most engaged in the issue of global warming, or at most, the Concerned segment. The Alarmed are convinced it is happening, that it is caused by human activity, and that it is an urgent threat. They are already making changes in their own lives and support an aggressive national response. Unfortunately for activists, only a quarter of them have contacted a public official regarding the issue (Leiserowitz et al., 2014a).

This is the context of U.S. climate advocacy: a public that is largely skeptical of the scientific consensus around the causes of climate change, and also disengaged politically from the issue—even within the Alarmed segment.

Legacy/Environmental Organizations and Climate Advocacy

Most of the legacy/environmental organizations I profile in this article are well-established players in an advocacy community that has been fairly stable since the 1970s. Although most of them began as local, grassroots-focused efforts, they have since evolved into large, national organizations that are now a permanent feature of the American political landscape (Bosso, 2005).

Most of these ‘legacy’ organizations have incorporated climate change into their advocacy agendas—in fact, some of them have been involved in climate advocacy for more than a quarter of a century (see for example: sierraclub.org, 2006). These groups have also invested heavily in enacting comprehensive federal climate policies. In 2009, when Congress was closer than ever to enacting comprehensive climate legislation—see Layzer (2011) and Pooley (2010) for detailed narratives—legacy/environmental and allied groups spent an estimated $394 million in climate and energy-related advocacy, outspending conservative advocacy groups and trade associations by $135 million (Nisbet, 2011). Some have criticized these groups for relying on an ‘armchair activism’ model usually associated with organizations established during the advocacy boom of the late 1960s to 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 (Bartosiewicz & Miley, 2013; Skocpol, 2003, 2013). However, recent scholarship on Internet-mediated activism has identified a different model embodied by the climate advocacy organizations I profile here.
Internet-Mediated Climate Advocacy

Widespread adoption of the Internet has enabled the rise of ‘Internet-mediated advocacy organizations’ (Karpf, 2012) whose communication and mobilization dynamics differ from the ‘armchair activism’ commonly associated with legacy/environmental organizations (Skocpol, 2003). Unlike legacy/environmental groups, they do not depend on paid memberships for financial stability; tend to maintain smaller, geographically dispersed staff that collaborate online; embrace multiple issue umbrellas (e.g. the environment, health care, civil rights, reproductive rights, etc.); and engage in opportunistic advocacy, also known as ‘headline-chasing’ (Karpf, 2012, p. 14). At the core of this distinction is the level of participation that each type of organization elicits from supporters: Internet-mediated organizations are presumed to seek greater levels of engagement from their supporters than armchair activism-oriented legacy organizations (Hestres, 2014; Skocpol, 2013).

But as we move from multi-issue to single-issue advocacy, some of these distinctions begin to fade. For example, the legacy/environmental and Internet-mediated/climate advocacy groups profiled here rely on the same types of online tools, and deploy them for virtually identical online action repertoires (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). The differences lie instead in the communication and mobilization strategies that organizations enact through these tools. These differences depend on two factors: the advocacy opportunities available to different organizations through the political process, and the resources they have accrued over time; and the combinations of models of the public sphere and democratic political change different organizations embrace (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Price, 2008).

Political Opportunities and Theories of Change

Social movement scholars have argued that most political movements ‘are set in motion by social changes that render the established political order more vulnerable or receptive to challenge’ (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 8), a perspective known as political process theory (PPT). Tarrow (2011) identifies four dimensions of political systems that shape collective action: the relative openness the political system, the stability of a system’s elite alignments, the presence of elite allies, and the state’s capacity and propensity for repression. Given the broadly democratic nature of the American political system and its low propensity for outright repression, it is the first three dimensions that most closely relate to U.S. climate advocacy.

Political process theory can only partially explain the emergence of new, climate-centric advocacy organizations in the U.S. Paradoxically, the political opportunities related to climate change in the U.S., such as unfettered access to the political system and the presence of elite allies concerned about climate change, may have led to the emergence of new organizations because of dissatisfaction with the opportunities available through the system to deal with the issue. Although the American political system has provided multiple openings for climate advocacy, it has not proved to be particularly

2 While single-issue organizations advocate on multiple issues, they tend to fall within widely recognized umbrellas. For example, Sierra Club may be active on climate change, clean water, and species conservation, but it is highly unlikely to campaign extensively on network neutrality or reproductive rights. By contrast, organizations such as MoveOn.org opportunistically campaign across issue umbrellas. Meanwhile, Internet-mediated ‘specialists’ as described by Karpf share most characteristics with generalists such as MoveOn.org, expect for their single-issue focus. 350.org is an example of this.
responsive. Seven comprehensive climate bills have been introduced in Congress since 2003, but only one was approved by the House of Representatives, and all seven have died in the Senate (Layzer, 2011, pp. 368-377). In other words, the level of openness of the American political system does not fully explain the emergence of these new organizations, but it can help explain the level of participation that different organizations try to elicit from supporters. Given the broad differences between U.S. legacy/environmental and Internet-mediated/climate organizations in terms of resources, longevity, and access to key U.S. policy-makers, Internet-mediated/climate groups might deploy outsider, grassroots-oriented strategies, while legacy/environmental groups might deploy elite-oriented strategies that play to their well-established organizations strengths. I discuss the differences between both types of groups below.

Different theories of political change can also influence the relationship between models of the public sphere and participation. Here, I define theories of change as the combination of advocacy goals, the strategies and tactics an organization believes will achieve them, and the assumptions underlying these strategies and tactics. For example, organizations that assume grassroots participation is critical to achieving certain advocacy goals might deploy different strategies and tactics than groups that privilege elite persuasion.  

Research Method

The organizations featured in this article were chosen on the basis of their representativeness of their respective advocacy communities, and the level of access they were likely to provide me to their staffers. I chose my interview subjects because of the key roles they have played in one of three organizational areas: online communications, field organization, and top-level leadership. I secured at least one interview with either a current or recent staff member from each organization, and in almost all cases I was able to secure interviews with multiple staffers. Respondents were asked open-ended questions about their organizations’ strategic assumptions and aims, their communication and mobilization strategies, and the tactics they use to achieve their strategic ends. All respondents gave informed consent to be interviewed. I conducted sixteen interviews between April-June 2012, and October 2013-January 2014, as part of a broader research project. Interviews include staff of three climate change organizations: 350.org, the 1Sky campaign, and the Energy Action Coalition; and four legacy/environmental organizations: the Environmental Defense Fund, Greenpeace USA, Sierra Club, and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Organizational Profiles

In order to provide some context for the interviews, I have summarized each organization’s mission, history, and climate advocacy efforts.

1Sky

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

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3 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. I used the term repeatedly during interviews and all respondents understood the term before answering questions about it. See Klugman (2011) for an academic treatment of the concept.
economic security’ (1Sky, 2008). It had three ambitious policy goals: reducing global warming pollution by at least 25% below 1990 levels by 2020 and at least 80% below 1990 levels by 2050; achieving a moratorium on the construction of new coal-burning power plants; and creating five million green jobs. During its three years of activity, 1Sky averaged 15 full-time staff members split between a central office and several states (1Sky, 2008, 2009, 2010). The campaign focused almost exclusively on various aspects of climate advocacy and closely related issues, including efforts to pass a comprehensive climate and clean energy bill in 2009-10. Because of the strong overlap in membership, leadership, funding sources, and strategic goals, the campaign merged with 350.org in April 2011 (Boeve, Butler, McKibben, & Taylor, 2011).

**350.org**

Environmental writer and activist Bill McKibben and a cohort of six students from Vermont’s Middlebury College founded 350.org after the Step It Up actions of 2007 (see Fisher & Boekkooi, 2010 for more background on Step It Up) in order to build ‘a global grassroots movement to solve the climate crisis’ (350.org, n.d.-a). The organization took its name from a study co-authored by Dr 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 no more than 350 ppm to avert the worst effects of climate change (Hansen et al., 2008). Its most visible campaign to date has been an effort to block approval of the Keystone XL pipeline project, which has included a civil disobedience campaign that has led so far to 1,253 arrests in front of the White House, along with various online and offline actions (McKibben, 2013, loc. 590). The group employed 29 U.S. staff—57 including international staff—as of December 2013 (Author, 2014; 350.org, 2012, n.d.-c).

**Energy Action Coalition (EAC)**

EAC was founded in 2005 by youth activist leaders from across the country to ‘build a powerful youth movement focused on solving the climate crisis and addressing environmental justice’ (energyactioncoalition.org, n.d.). Its key function within the climate movement has been organizing a biennial, national climate youth movement conference called Power Shift. Every two years since 2007, thousands of college students and other youths from across the country have gathered in the Washington D.C. area, and most recently in Pittsburgh, PA, for a long weekend of ‘training, action and inspiration’ (wearepowershift.org, n.d.-a). EAC maintained a staff of twelve as of December 2013 and is headquartered in Washington, DC. In addition to its role in coordinating the Power Shift conferences, EAC has been deeply involved in supporting the environmental justice movement, developing leadership among young climate activists at the grassroots level, pushing college campuses to embrace carbon neutrality, and supporting the 350.org-led Keystone XL campaign (wearepowershift.org, n.d.-c).

**Environmental Defense Fund (EDF)**

Founded in 1966, EDF pioneered the use of the legal system to protect the environment. Its first lawsuit tried to ban the use of the pesticide DDT in Long Island, NY, and was followed by other successful suits and advocacy that led to a nationwide ban of DDT in 1972 (Bosso, 2005, p. 42; edf.org, 2013c). EDF has since evolved into a large environmental organization with a reputation for ‘insiderism’; for applying legal, scientific, and economic expertise to promote legislation; and for its centrist ideology (Nisbet, 2011). EDF’s approach has combined scientific expertise, market-based economic incentives, partnerships with farmers, investors, corporations and other stakeholders, and nonpartisan policy research (edf.org, 2013a). EDF was one of the strongest proponents of cap and
trade in the U.S., and of a global climate treaty that embraced strong caps on carbon pollution (Pooley, 2010, pp. 97-99). However, its acceptance of corporate donations and willingness to work with corporations has sometimes caused other environmentalists to question the motives behind its policy positions (e.g., EDF’s support for NAFTA; see: Bosso, 2005, p. 115; Pooley, 2010, p. 57).

**Greenpeace USA**

Greenpeace USA is the U.S. affiliate of Greenpeace International, an environmental organization founded in 1971 in Vancouver, British Columbia, and currently headquartered in Amsterdam. The organization emerged in dramatic fashion when a handful of activists leased a small fishing vessel and set sail from Vancouver for Amchitka Island in Alaska to protest U.S. nuclear testing in the Aleutian archipelago—an action that brought worldwide attention to the environmental consequences of nuclear testing (Bosso, 2005, p. 44; greenpeaceusa.org, 2013).

Former U.S. executive director Phil Radford sums up Greenpeace USA’s advocacy approach this way: 'We 'bear witness' to environmental destruction in a peaceful, non-violent manner. We use non-violent confrontation to raise the level and quality of public debate' (greenpeaceusa, 2013). It is also reflected in its refusal to accept contributions from corporations or governments (greenpeaceusa.org, 2013). The group has opposed the most prominent legislative vehicles to enact a cap on carbon emissions in the U.S.—including bills such as the American Clean Energy and Security Act, also known as the Waxman-Markey bill—on grounds that they were insufficiently aggressive and overly generous to fossil fuel companies (Pooley, 2010, pp. 294, 380).

**The Sierra Club**

The Sierra Club, one of the oldest legacy/environmental organizations in the U.S., was founded in 1892 following conservationist John Muir’s efforts to transfer jurisdiction over Yosemite National Park from the State of California to the federal government to ensure its protection from overdevelopment (Bosso, 2005, p. 23). It has since evolved into a national organization with 65 state and local chapters and 2.1 million members and supporters across the country—including approximately 600,000 dues-paying members—that combines environmental advocacy with activities that promote appreciation of the outdoors, such as group hikes and camping (Barringer, 2012; sierraclub.org, 2014; sierraclubfoundation.org, 2012, p. 38). A Sierra Club paid membership comes with numerous benefits, including: discounts on clothing, auto and home insurance, household appliances, travel, and other goods and services; a subscription to a bimonthly magazine; a branded Visa credit card; discounts on Sierra Club-branded goods; and other benefits (sierraclub.org, 2013).

In recent years, the Club’s climate advocacy, through its Beyond Coal campaign, has focused on retiring one-third of the nation’s coal power plants, replacing the majority of these plants with clean energy alternatives, and keeping coal in the ground in places such as Appalachia and Wyoming’s Powder River Basin (sierraclub.org, n.d.). Most recently, the Club endorsed civil disobedience for the first time in its history when it joined the campaign against the Keystone XL project (Unger, 2013).

**Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC)**

NRDC emerged as part of the advocacy group boom of the late-1950s to early 1970s. Yale Law School students originally established it as an environmental law firm along the lines of the ACLU or the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Over the years, it evolved into a large organization that embraced a
'law and science' advocacy model similar to that of EDF, building a large program staff comprised of scientists, lawyers, and lobbyists (Bosso, 2005, pp. 43-44).

In the mid-to-late 2000s, NRDC supported comprehensive climate legislation—including Waxman-Markey—that included a carbon cap, and was part of the Clean Energy Works War Room, a political campaign-style rapid response operation staffed by environmental, labour, and broadly progressive organizations (Pooley, 2010, pp. 400, 419-420). NRDC accepts corporate donations, a practice that has sometimes earned it criticism from other environmentalists (Bosso, 2005, p. 115).

**Theories of Change and Target Audiences**

My interviews with staff members from climate organizations revealed a shared belief in a theory of change that holds the need for a climate change social movement as critical to achieving comprehensive solutions to the crisis. They also revealed a sense that something other than traditional issue advocacy—e.g. ‘armchair activism’ as described by Skocpol (2003)—is necessary given the scale of the problem.

Jon Warnow, a 350.org co-founder and its web director, explained his organization’s theory of change thus:

> Our basic theory of change is that if enough people who care passionately about the future of the planet and about the climate crisis can get together and have a strategic platform for what essentially amounts to political action, and then we can create a groundswell of citizen pressure in the U.S. and around the world. (Personal communication, May 18, 2012)

Former grassroots organizer Ada Aroneanu echoed this view in articulating 1Sky’s theory of change:

> We believed it would take a movement of people to rise up and demand change from people in positions of power before change would happen. We also tried to include grassroots leaders and prioritize the grassroots and make them equal stakeholders in the campaign. (Personal communication, May 14, 2012)

EAC’s online director Jeff Mann emphasized a bottom-up approach that reflects that organization’s focus on the climate youth movement:

> Basically, our theory of change is to build the networks, [build] people power, train young organizers at college campuses, [and] creating organizing capacity to win fights at the local and national level and using the political power of young people. (Personal communication, November 8, 2013)

These comments indicate a theory of change broadly shared among these Internet-mediated/climate groups that emphasizes bottom-up, grassroots participation in addressing climate change as a social and political issue. Closely related to this theory of change are the audiences they choose to address most actively. There was a near-unanimous consensus among respondents about the ideal target of their organizations’ communication and mobilization efforts: individuals who are already deeply concerned about climate change and who think collective action is necessary to solve the problem—in other words, the Alarmed public, sometimes edging into the Concerned.
Kimberly Fountain, a 1Sky grassroots organizer, said: ‘We were targeting our base; people who already believed in climate change, believed that not enough was being done to curb climate change, and were willing to do something’ (Personal communication, May 10, 2012). EAC’s Jeff Mann also echoed this commitment to recruiting and mobilizing those who were already sympathetic to its goals:

Our audience is people who are passionate about environmental issues, and people who are aware and concerned about [climate change], who are on our side but maybe are not mobilized. We’re trying to go beyond our hard-core base, but I don’t think our goal is persuading climate deniers. (Personal conversation, November 8, 2013)

The homogeneity of theories of change and target audiences displayed by Internet-mediated/climate groups differs from responses from legacy/environmental groups, which present a more heterogeneous picture. Asked to describe EDF’s overarching theory of change, climate communications director Keith Gaby described a deeply pragmatic approach that emphasized the role of markets and economic incentives in tackling climate change:

We use a mix of approaches, including regulation, but we need a market-based solution. The market is the most powerful force. We need to realign the economic incentives so that clean energy has a comparative advantage…and the price of fossil fuels reflects their true cost to society. (Personal communication, October 18, 2014)

During the interview, Gaby also described many strengths that EDF brings to climate advocacy, including decades-long work on various environmental issues, a focus on economics, a willingness to both confront and partner with corporations, and its credibility with a broad centre-left and centre-right ideological spectrum. David Acup, senior director of interactive marketing and membership at EDF, also emphasized the importance it attaches to economics and market-based approaches by citing the fact that EDF was the first environmental organization to hire an economist with a Ph.D. (Personal communication, October 21, 2013). As for target audiences, Gaby described an approach that varies significantly from that of Internet-mediated/climate groups:

We don’t focus on committed, angry deniers, and we don’t focus on the Alarmed because that middle 70% is what’s important to us. We’re trying to make [climate change] a higher priority for the centre-left, and trying to find the right approach with the centre right. (Personal communication, October 18, 2014)

Former NRDC director of online strategy Apollo Gonzales described a similar theory of change for his former employer that primarily emphasized policy expertise and high-level decision-maker persuasion:

[NRDC] has a variety of types of roles. There are attorneys, there are policy advocates-slash-lobbyists, there are scientists, and program specialists who are advocates, and so every position has a different theory of change. (Personal communication, November 21, 2014)

Addressing the strengths that NRDC brings to climate and environmental advocacy, Gonzales characterized its policy and scientific expertise as ‘huge’—a description that was confirmed by NRDC email coordinator Liz Langton (Personal communication, January 7, 2014). Gonzales also noted the influence that its experts exert on media coverage, as measured by mentions and quotes in various media, congressional floor debates, and similar public arenas. Gonzales mentioned that, although NRDC concentrated on the Alarmed segment, it also reached out to ‘folks inclined to reason [and]
being receptive to science around climate’ (Personal communication, November 21, 2014)—a segment that falls in the 70% mentioned by EDF’s Gaby. Langton described NRDC’s audience targeting this way:

> We have a base and we try to communicate with them in the best way possible. But we’re also reaching new audiences—those people that don’t necessarily consider themselves environmentalists. We’re talking about moms, pet owners, sports enthusiasts—people that don’t necessarily talk about climate change in their everyday lives, but maybe when they’re going out skiing and there’s no snow on the slopes, there’s a person that we can target and say: this should be important to you because it’s affecting your life. (Personal communication, January 7, 2014)

These answers reveal a broadly shared theory of change that emphasizes scientific and policy expertise and elite decision-maker persuasion. They contrast with answers from staff at other organizations that emphasize alternative theories of change. Perhaps the strongest contrast comes from Greenpeace USA. Michael Silberman, global director of Greenpeace’s Digital Mobilisation Lab—and former 1Sky Internet director—described Greenpeace’s theory of change this way:

> Greenpeace is very much focusing on the corporate side of the equation...less on the political side...we’ve moved way from the ‘Congress needs to pass a bill’ phase. We’re putting direct pressure on companies to make [dirty energy] harder to exist. We’re creating a toxic environment for dirty energy. (Personal communication, October 18, 2014)

Silberman cited Greenpeace’s history and willingness to take direct, non-violent action as one of the assets it brings to climate advocacy. He also mentioned its ability to create media ‘moments’ through its actions, and its investments in grassroots field staff, an online activist network, a campus network, and more investments in mobilization. Unlike EDF, Greenpeace tends to see corporations more as part of the problem than part of the solution.

In the Sierra Club’s case, its grassroots-oriented theory of change stems from its long history and organizational structure. As the Club’s director of digital innovation Michael Grenetz put it:

> Sierra Club...has a very democratic, grassroots empowerment focus. We have volunteers on the ground, we have chapters that are self-led and self-funded. I think this ethos of movement-building and power-building is Sierra Club’s theory of change: [the ethos] that by building people-power and empowering people to run campaigns on the issues they care about is how we win. (Personal communication, October 30, 2013)

Like Greenpeace’s Silberman, Grenetz emphasized Sierra Club’s grassroots organizing prowess as a key strength it brings to climate advocacy. Examples included the Club’s Beyond Coal campaign and the large turnout it has produced for climate rallies and events led by 350.org.

**Theories of Change and Strategic Internet Use**

Strategists described strategic Internet uses that tend to align with the theories of change outlined above. Groups that embrace theories of change emphasizing policy expertise and elite persuasion described online strategies that plays to this strength, while groups that emphasized grassroots and participatory theories of change described online strategies that are most conducive to this type of
mobilization. Alex Bea, former online team member at both 350.org and 1Sky, describes the emphasis that 350.org places on online-to-offline actions:

The most prevalent [actions] were offline actions. The global days of action...[were] about letting most people take action offline, however they wanted to but making sure they do it offline and publicly. There were a lot of ralilies, teach-in events, speaking events [and] marches. There was some petition work but not a lot. Most of the work was spent organizing offline. (Personal communication, May 17, 2012)

The Climate Precinct Captains (CPC) program, an ambitious effort to give local groups and organizers online tools to support their offline actions, exemplified the 1Sky campaign’s commitment to online-to-offline action. The campaign also coordinated the Climate Network, an online community through which 1Sky and three other groups—Clean Energy Works, the Energy Action Coalition, and Focus the Nation—engaged activists. Ultimately, the program did not meet expectations and was abandoned (1Sky, 2008; Moore, Silberman, & Butler, 2010).

An emphasis on grassroots participation sometimes involves a strategic decision to trade some message control—an asset highly valued by political communication practitioners—in order to encourage participation. EAC’s Jeff Mann discussed this trade-off within the context of the group’s Power Shift blog:

What I think we get from [trading message control] is a space that the grassroots can feel is their space, that they’re not blogging for EAC but because they have something to say, so I think people are more interested in that. (Personal communication, November 8, 2013)

The strategic Internet use and action repertoires described by EDF’s Keith Gaby differs notably from uses and repertoires described above. When asked what types of actions EDF supporters are asked to take, Gaby replied:

We ask them to write their congressman, to comment on EPA regulations, to communicate to the White House, to talk to their local officials. If they make political contributions, to convey that they are doing this based on the recipient’s position on climate, essentially to communicate. We have sometimes had field operations but we don’t tend to maintain one. (Personal communication, October 18, 2013)

Gaby also mentioned EDF’s extensive use of specialized blogs to reach specific audiences—e.g. fisherman, farmers, etc.—as well as elite opinion and the general public. This approach also extends to EDF’s use of social networks. Mica Vehik, communications director for EDF’s U.S. climate and energy program, highlighted EDF’s use of LinkedIn—a social network not typically associated with issue advocacy—as a communications outlet because of its professional orientation (Personal communication, December 5, 2013). Similarly, NRDC’s Langton emphasized low-threshold online actions as that organization’s mobilizing goal:

The main goal is to ultimately get them to comment to the EPA; to help drive as many comments needed to get the new [carbon pollution] source standards through, and then later this year the existing [carbon pollution] source standards through. (Personal communication, January 7, 2014)
These online strategies not only differ from those emphasized by Internet-mediated/climate groups, but also from those highlighted by grassroots-oriented groups like Greenpeace. Perhaps the best example of Greenpeace’s online strategies for spurring widespread, high-level participation is the Mobilisation Lab: a global initiative to maximize volunteer-led advocacy and test new ideas for online and offline engagement. Launched as a consequence of the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, and inspired by decentralized movements like the so-called Arab Spring, the Mobilisation Lab:

(P)rovides the global organization and its allies a dynamic, forward-looking space to envision, test, and roll out creative new means of inspiring larger networks of leaders and people around the world to break through and win on threats to people and the planet. (Greenpeace, n.d.)

Greenpeace’s Silberman confirmed that the Mobilisation Lab is an attempt to implement a strategic vision that moves away from top-down campaigns with tightly controlled messaging to a looser, more open-ended model. As Silberman put it, Greenpeace is ‘switching to a mentor role rather than [being] the hero of the story’ (Personal communication, October 18, 2013).

Oliver Bernstein, the national communications strategist for Sierra Club, invoked the concept of the ‘ladder of engagement’ to describe the Club’s online-to-offline organizing efforts. 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. In Sierra Club’s case, the ladder might consist of actions such as tweeting to fossil fuel company CEOs that progressively lead to higher-threshold actions, such as becoming a volunteer or a volunteer leader. According to Bernstein, Sierra Club ‘certainly didn’t invent the [ladder of engagement] concept, but I would say we have perfected a lot of it and continue to perfect how you bring the activists in and get them involved’ (Personal communication, November 13, 2013).

Table 1 provides a summary of findings stemming from these interviews.

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Discussion

These interviews suggest that organizations adhering to theories of change that emphasize subject-matter expertise and elite opinion persuasion are more likely to pursue online strategies that encourage low-threshold participation and facilitate the flow of ideas among elites. They also suggest that organizations embracing theories of change that emphasize broad-based, high-threshold participation are more likely to pursue online strategies that facilitate grassroots participation in the political process. All of these organizations to varying extents use the same online tools: sophisticated mass email systems, constituent relations management (eCRM) software to manage their supporter lists, blogs, search engine optimization (SEO), online advertising, and social media, among others. But their strategic thinking on how to use these tools varies considerably between organizations, and such variation seems related to the theories of change they embrace.

The interviews also point to broadly shared theories of change among Internet-mediated/climate organizations, but greater heterogeneity among legacy/environmental organizations. These differences may be explained by the historical contexts in which these organizations were established. The Internet-mediated/climate organizations featured in this article were all established in the late 2000s,
against the backdrop of a political system that had proved incapable or unwilling to enact climate solutions at the scale that activists thought necessary. A broadly shared sense that ‘politics as usual’ would not suffice to enact such solutions was the driving force behind their origins.

Conversely, the origins of the legacy/environmental organizations profiled are more heterogeneous. EDF and NRDC were established within a political climate that was more receptive to calls for environmental regulation and governmental action in general. Their approaches were highly successful during this era, and encouraged further investment in the resources needed to expand this approach: greater subject-matter expertise and sophisticated elite persuasion operations. Greenpeace USA is the national affiliate of a global organization that did not originate in the U.S. and therefore carries a different historical tradition of advocacy, while Sierra Club’s long history of chapter-based governance has led to an emphasis on grassroots mobilization in its advocacy.

**Implications for Climate Communication**

Understanding the online communication practices of Internet-mediated/climate and legacy/environmental organizations is important because these groups have a role to play in both growing and mobilizing the climate public. Some organizations seem focused on maximizing mobilization of the Alarmed, while others place greater emphasis on reaching and persuading new audiences. At the very least, the latter groups seem to have a dual focus: preaching to the choir while also recruiting new supporters who will become if not members of the choir at least fellow believers. These findings give us a better idea of what role different types of organizations that advocate around climate can play in future debates.

Enacting any large-scale, long-term national climate policy will require both significant grassroots mobilization and elite allies in Washington to help pass legislation and monitor its implementation. Just as legacy/environmental organizations have relied on the grassroots energy and mobilization capacity of 350.org to (temporarily) halt the Keystone XL pipeline, Internet-mediated/climate organizations will most likely rely on the scientific and policy expertise of legacy/environmental groups in the future, and to some extent do so today. Both of the strengths that these organizations provide will be necessary and complementary.

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