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Movement Building and Deep Change: A Call to Mobilize Strong and Weak Ties

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Malcolm Gladwell's recent piece in the *New Yorker*, "[Small Change: Why the Revolution Won't Be Tweeted](#)", has started a discussion about whether online social ties -- because they lack depth in relationship -- build movements or not.

Among those of us practicing movement building and creating deep change, the more immediate question is how both weak and strong ties are being used on the front lines of social change action today. Many readers of Gladwell's piece object to the false choice between offline and online. So let's not choose. Let's talk about efforts and organizations that are using both offline and online tools to build an unprecedented movement in this unprecedented moment.

We study and practice movement building and are part of a wider community of practice. Below, we share four stories that illustrate what we're seeing on the ground and talking about in our network. Regardless of the tools we use, what connects and inspires people are stories. Social media platforms offer new ways of engaging and sharing each other's stories, with organizational stories, with national or global stories -- yet they're no substitute for face-to-face deep community building. Our hope is that these stories and tools are of use to those committed to the deep and high-risk social change that Gladwell rightly calls for. We welcome your comments and encourage you to let us know about other stories, experiences and ideas.

Context: From Big Email Lists to Communities of Care

Whenever we talk about change, we are also talking about community. Large-scale change only happens when networked communities of people move together. Strong ties and relationships are built-in and maintained by the network of community.

Today we are living in a time where economic, cultural and communications shifts have undermined communities, promoted isolation and social fragmentation, and weakened our ability to develop personal and community ties. In a [two-decade study](#) that looked at who people talk to, the number of people that individuals said they felt they could talk to went from three to zero.

As movement builders today, our work to build deep social change must include the building of community ties that are not just political in nature. We need to encourage people to do the things churches did for the civil rights movement -- being there as babies are born, people are sick, and for life's big and small moments. In other words: to take care of each other while creating change. We need to do this personally and systemically -- from bringing each other soup to creating real systems of daycare.

Gladwell is correct that people with deeper social ties and trust will do more for each other on the ground. Yet too many of our organizations have become predominantly transactional places. We must move beyond the time where membership is only defined by signing an online petition or building lists and donations through picking out a horror from the Fox news cycle.

Certainly this is time of massive shift. We are moving from a time where the ability to share information and build collective action across time and space has changed. We are also moving from a time of centralized control to one that is more distributed and decentralized. Both aspects of this shift have been discussed by Clay Shirky ([Here Comes Everybody](#)) and Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom ([The Starfish and The Spider](#), a favorite of Tea Party leaders and progressive organizers alike).

At the same time, there has also been an overestimation of what "click activism" can do. Andrew Blau, a thinker about networks, puts it this way: "People sometimes confuse the information revolution -- the incredible exchange of ideas, the ability to create together online -- with the ability to push real levers of power."

The social change community is beginning to see a profound new way to shift power, and that is a hybrid between centralized efforts and decentralized networks and online and offline connections. Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Church model is a hybrid (and the book is another widely read text among organizers today), blending small circles with a clear over-arching purpose.

Obama '08 was a hybrid blend and some of the best of what we are seeing on the ground merges these two models even further.

What we call "broadcast organizing" -- big email lists or large networks who push one message out and ask people to click and change -- is evolving. While some people are content to click, more and more people are increasingly wanting to co-create, and ultimately to lead, from a local level. Local organizing and people who are not part of the digital divide are also evolving.

Local efforts in Arizona to build barrios (neighborhood) groups are also using text messaging. Local efforts are looking to create systemic change by aggregating together. But what is working of these hybrid models? And what are the tools that are being identified by organizers as making a difference in movement building today?

Stories

We live by stories, by narratives that define and can shift our view of who we are alone to who we are together. Obama '08 used many strategies, but narrative story -- incorporated into Obama Camp training materials by Marshall Ganz and others --

was the key to field leaders feeling that their story was tied to a bigger movement. It is a tool that many of us are studying, using, and replicating, and one that has been around a long time.

Anyone who visited Obama's Chicago headquarters could not have missed the new media team. They worked around the clock to engage folks in hundreds of online networks from Facebook to Black Planet, giving them new places to share and listen to stories. The social media team used online tools to measure every click on every email and respond as the story evolved. They pounded the pavement to capture local and national videos telling and reflecting the story of an historic election. They used iPhone applications and text messaging in brilliant new ways that are still redefining community and GOTV outreach. What would '08 have been without either online or offline? And what would either have been without the human capacity to listen and share stories?

The first story: [350.org Co-creativity Versus Levers of Power](#)

In October 2009, 350.org decided to create a simple action before the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. Through Facebook, email, and Twitter, they asked people to get off the internet and create photos of themselves with the number 350, the upper limit scientists consider to be an acceptable ppm of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. With participants in 181 countries, it was touted as "the most widespread day of environmental action in the planet's history." From two people in Antarctica holding a sign saying "350" on top of ice to a large group of students in the Philippines using their bodies to spell out "350" over 5200 actions took place. ([Photos here](#))

It was a day that exemplified what was possible through network organizing and using the new tools. Not everyone involved in the day of action had deep ties to others, but many did and took action as part of a community. What did work was to give these individual groups of weak and strong social ties two important movement building tools: a sense of co-creativity and the power of collective reflection.

Yet while 350.org broke the mold around what was possible, it ultimately did not achieve its goal of moving world leaders to action. In fact, many said the most important thing to come out of Copenhagen was that the Global Justice community -- those impacted by global warming the most -- got to meet and grow a network more deeply with each other. Another question began to emerge: How could an analysis of the levers of power have moved this effort from a demonstration of creativity to the desired action?

In 2010, 350.org's day of action -- on October 10th -- grew to include 188 countries and over 7,000 actions. Top leadership in the Global Justice community -- particularly from the student efforts and those studying the Marshall Ganz model -- are looking more deeply at local leadership and bringing their lessons of story and new strategy to conversations, building the next phase of this movement.

A second story: [Bayard Rustin and New Media versus Old Media](#)

Before four college students sat down at a counter in Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina on February 1, 1960, they had two tools that were critical to movement building: a commitment to the transformational practice of non-violence and a strong alliance of groups standing together with them.

Although there are many people who were leaders in creating the civil rights movement, certainly one of the most under-reported on is Bayard Rustin. Rustin was a leader of one of the first freedom rides, the Journey of Reconciliation in 1947. He and seven other men set out to take direct action in states where traveling on public transportation was still segregated. They were looking to push and test states who refused to comply with the recent Supreme Court decision, [Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia \(1946\)](#), which said racial discrimination could no longer happen in interstate travel. Using non-violent tactics, the team of eight riders traveled through Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky and Tennessee. They were arrested several times and Rustin served on a chain gang for a little under a month in North Carolina.

Undeterred, Rustin went to India and studied Gandhi's tactics. Rustin's internal commitment to non-violence and his ability to work in alliance led him to do two critical pieces of organizing. First, he became Dr. King's advisor on non-violence in 1956 and second, he and Dr. King helped form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the alliance of organizations and community groups that trained and prepared students and community members for the local actions of lunch counter sit-ins and bus-riding boycotts.

The civil rights movement had an important third tool as those young men sat down at the counters -- a larger social network that was engaged. This network was made up of those who watched the images on TV of official violence being exacted on children and communities engaged in non-violent protest. They were not part of the direct organizing efforts but they helped create change by shifting their hearts and minds. The civil rights movement needed television to help reach enough of the population to turn the country against the policies of segregation.

In this same way, deep movements today need new media to reach many people, especially at a time when mainstream broadcast media (which already gave limited coverage of the progressive movement) is in decline and less able to reach a critical mass of the public.

Bayard Rustin was also successful because of his work to build alliances between groups. (And he did this as a Gay Black man who was out about his sexuality). Alliance building where local leaders on the ground are deeply supported is still one of the most important movement building tools we have today. Our next story delves deeper into combining alliance building with new media tools.

A third story: [Expanding the Movement for Empowerment and Reproductive Justice \(EMERJ\), or How Impacted Communities Can Lead](#)

A group of women who work on the front lines of reproductive issues are often left out of policy debates, access to funding, and a sense of their collective power. They believe in the idea of "reproductive justice," a term that came into organizing in the 1990s but has roots older than that.

In 2005, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice (ACRJ) put out a "clarion call" to those working on the front lines. They published "[A New Vision for Advancing our Movement for Reproductive Health, Reproductive Rights and Reproductive](#)

[Justice](#)", made 1000 copies, and launched it at a national meeting.

But then ACRJ added new media tools to the mix and put the report out through their social networks on the web. Because of new media, within a short period of time, 50,000 people read the paper and wanted to be engaged. ACRJ added deep leadership and formed the EMERJ Strategy Team, which includes leaders from Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, [California Latinas for Reproductive Justice](#), [Center for Young Women's Development](#), [Choice USA](#), [National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum](#), [National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health](#), [Rebecca Project for Human Rights](#), and [Western States Center](#).

This alliance works to build the network and strategize together. What this means is that organizations traditionally on the front lines at the local level are being heard as legislation is being passed. It means that smaller groups formerly separated are now an alliance able to build together.

The success of the EMERJ alliance is part of the new organizing: taking local efforts, creating a national anchor team and alliance, and building a base that is truly connected to the grassroots through deep social, cultural, and community ties. It is helped by the shift that is happening, the ability to move information online and to reach out to more communities and individuals.

The Alliance is the new driver of the movement because it brings together national leadership with deep local connection. The power of hierarchical organizing is no longer maximized in single NGO's but in teams of community-based groups and state-wide efforts forming national alliances that are based on authentic commitments, agreements and committed social ties.

(And please don't mix it up with a "coalition" a group of loose organizations working towards one short term goal without long-term commitments). New media assists and supports the Alliance. The strength is found in the hybrid of national (hierarchical) and local (distributive), as well as the hybrid of new media/online organizing with traditional, "high-touch" face-to-face organizing.

A final story (really a tool disguised as a story): *How We Move People from Loose Social Ties to Movement Leaders, or The Engagement Ladder*

People move along a continuum. From potential audience to community, to member to committed to core leader. We call this an engagement ladder and many organizations use a form of this today when moving people from an email list to a movement leader.

Here's an example of an engagement ladder:

POTENTIAL AUDIENCE--COMMUNITY--MEMBER--COMMITTED--LEADER

The most effective way to build and understand an engagement ladder is through a story of a leader (or group) whose path exemplifies our goal of keeping folks engaged in social change for the long term:

A single mother, Sung E Bai, becomes concerned with how she as a single mom can create nutritious meals while running out the door to work, and the kind of food being served at her daughter's school. These concerns put her into a potential audience for the food movement. She does some research online and joins a Facebook group of a national food advocacy organization and begins to read up on the issue. These loose social ties move her from potential audience to community. She writes a check to that national organization and becomes a member, moving up yet another level.

It is at this moment where the rubber meets the road: if there is an ability or action in place that moves her from member to someone who is committed, it generally won't happen online. For her to be a committed, she will need in-person connection and ways to reach out to others in her community. And for her to move from committed to leader, she will need training and a clear pathway that builds her up as a leader. For her to become a leader, she will need time and experience within the movement.

The good news is that Sung E Bai is a real person who is part of SlowFood USA; and she came to the organization with a lot of skill from her years as a committed community organizer in New York. Yet, Sung E's task is to be part of a team that builds more people like her, to not just have people join an email list but to have clear and meaningful ways for people to move from audience to core and join the food justice movement.

Will all the people on SlowFood's email list join her? No. Our research says that somewhere between one and ten percent of that list will become core leaders. These leaders will create the deep change that we will remember. All along the engagement ladder, there needs to be a sense of what people can do to support these bolder efforts. Part of the success of the lunch counter sit-in was the ability of the movement to create a national story and reflection that others could take action within -- from sending money, to talking to friends and family, to voting, to joining freedom rides, to giving their lives.

The local food movement, one of the fastest growing local, national and international movements today is growing so fast, in part because of the diversity of its network. The question now is how unified it can be in building alliances, deepening local leadership, and creating tools that allow everyday citizens to participate.

It won't be SlowFood alone who will build the local food movement. Sung E's ties with lead organizers in similar but distinct movements - including social ties with leaders like Makani Themba-Nixon of [Praxis Project](#), and [Navina Khanna](#) who is building a youth of color network for food justice -- will make the difference between a food movement that is stuck in silos and one that has an alliance that Bayard Rustin would be proud of.

Writing A New Story

When we when all stood crying and hugging each other as we elected Obama, we weren't ready to change the story from how to elect Obama to the story of how we practice change. In creating one hero, first time voters and citizens (and yes, even some of us who got swept up in it) were not prepared for the journey beyond the election or for the long-term effort that change would require. Now, as electoral organizers are reaching out to those who worked on the '08 campaign, they are finding a lot is missing. The campaign decided to carry on the campaign rather than build a true community. But we can turn that around.

Small groups of local organizers from across the nation are coming together, sharing tactics about building neighborhood groups, and how to empower everyday people to resist and transform racist laws, food systems, or any other issues impacting their communities. These organizers are coming together in networks, against the large single broadcast model. In these efforts, they are using food and song, meetings in churches and text messaging--all as tools to create more community, deeper ties, and stronger alliances. Even the movement to bring song, art, and culture back to organizing is building a network under Anasa Troutman of [Art Is Change](#) and others.

Of course, as we write about these efforts, new tools and alliances are emerging. Text messaging and geolocation are breaking new ground in online to offline efforts. Meet-Up has recently initiated a new tool that allows organizations to do small groups more effectively. Yet, as Gladwell and Shirky have both pointed out, social change happens on the ground with each other. What is critical is that while studying tools and building alliances, we remain deeply committed to our practice of understanding and loving each other in community.

Here is a brief list of resources and reports on movement building and engagement pathways and tools online and offline. We encourage people to post more examples and groups in the comments.

- Movement Strategy Center: Out of the Spiritual Closet: Organizers Transforming the Practice of Social Justice, the first in a series on [Transformative Movement Building](#).
- Organizing using and evolving the Marshall Ganz model: [The New Organizing Institute](#).
- Scott Goodstein: [Forget the internet: Think Mobile](#) from Huffington Post
- Clay Shirky at [PDF10](#)
- Scott Heiferman, [Meet Up talk at PDF10](#)
- Michael Silberman of EchoDitto on the need to stop pretending click activism changes things. ([His blog on Copenhagen](#))
- [Clicktivism is Ruining Left Activism](#).

Books: *The Starfish & The Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Networks* by Rod Beckstrom and Ori Brafman; *Here Comes Everybody* by Clay Shirky; *Purpose Driven Church* By Rick Warren

Taj James is a founder of the [Movement Strategy Center](#), an organization that works to build alliances and movement strategies within the progressive community. **Marianne Manilov** is a co-founder of [The Engage Network](#), an organization that works to build distributive networks and engagement pathways that was born out of MSC. James and Manilov work collaboratively in a community of people and organizations who helped to birth and practice these ideas.