

Rise of Online Organizing Makes Internet Crowd a Must-Win Constituency

Posted: 02/ 7/2012 4:32 pm

Events of last week left little doubt about the political clout of the Internet. Thanks to an online firestorm, Planned Parenthood not only emerged from a three-day flap with funding intact, but also [10,000 Facebook fans](#) stronger and about \$3 million richer. "Online Backlash Boosts Planned Parenthood" and "Social Media Flexes Muscle" were headlines we saw over and over again.

There's no question that social media organizing has come of age. Twitter and Facebook are beating the drum of every modern civic protest, catapulting peripheral issues into the national conversation through #hashtags and 'likes.' But who is the driving force behind social media -- and by extension, contemporary political movements?

Young people. And in 2012, it makes us a "must win" constituency.

There's a reason that a threat to Planned Parenthood can spark online furor the way, say, an attack on the AARP might not -- reproductive health issues fire up the "Internet crowd." According to the organization's [2009 Annual Report](#), roughly 81% of Planned Parenthood patients are between the ages of 18 and 39, with more than half of those under 24.

Social media activism largely mirrors this demographic.

It's true that online networks are hugely popular in [every age group](#), with Baby Boomers and seniors flocking to Facebook and Twitter in record numbers every day. But when it comes to political activity, online participants remain [disproportionately young](#).

This flies in the face of conventional wisdom (and statistics) on civic engagement. Offline, young adults are still the group least likely to take political action. But when it comes to online activity, it's seniors -- traditionally seen as the most reliable vote bloc -- who are the least politically active.

The Internet not only narrows the participation gap between young and old, it lends a powerful platform to a typically quiet constituency -- we've grabbed the bullhorn and, all of a sudden, our agenda is beginning to resonate.

Take the Protect Intellectual Property Act (PIPA) and Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) uproar of earlier this month. Both anti-piracy bills were moving full speed ahead through Congress until [millions spontaneously protested online](#), halting both bills dead in their tracks.

It was a victory chalked up to the "power of the web," with Google and Wikipedia out-muscling Hollywood lobbyists. But *if a site goes down in the forest, and no one is around to see it...* The fact is, the Internet "won" because Internet users -- read: young adults -- got angry and took action.

SOPA and PIPA fell to the sword of the Net before ever cracking mainstream consciousness. According to the weekly news interest snapshot by [Pew Research Center for the People & the Press](#), only 7% of the general public followed the online piracy legislation issue. Yet it was the top story followed by young people ages 18-29 the week of January 16th, with nearly a quarter of them tracking the issue.

Yes, it was a win for the Internet. But beyond that, it was a true testament to the power of the Internet constituency.

And Millennials' newfound political heft isn't merely playing out across the web. Through online engagement, young people are -- perhaps unwittingly -- beginning to influence the discussion in mediums typically dominated by older demographics, as well.

CNN's social media-infused election coverage is a great example of this. Producers aren't padding political segments with viewer emails or "man on the street" interviews anymore. Instead they're gauging voter reaction by tracking tweets and aggregating online conversations -- thus, skewing the sample pool younger and melding fresh sentiments into the core narrative.

Campaigns have caught on to this -- recognizing that social media outlets provide an immediate and continual feedback loop that spurns traditional media stories, they're harnessing Twitter and Facebook to engage voters, monitor reactions and anticipate press topics. So how long before candidates begin pandering to Internet users the way they do other early influencers, like the Iowa Caucus-goers? Only time will tell.

At the end of the day, the 18-34 set may never have the political upper hand; we are by no means the wealthiest constituency. We don't have the firepower of corporate lobbyists. And our ballot box turnout is less than stellar.

But before writing off our issues, lawmakers would do well to remember: We're at the helm of the world's most powerful mobilizing apparatus -- and we're not afraid to use it.

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