Degrees of Annoyance

"I think most people would agree", a campaigner from a large NGO said at a meeting I was at last week, "that organisations like 38 Degrees are a bit annoying". By 'people' he meant campaigners in large NGOs, although the annoyance was certainly shared by UK Member of Parliament Dominic Raab, who in August had his email address removed from the British House of Commons website and tried to intimidate 38 Degrees into no longer getting its supporters to email him on 38 Degrees campaign topics. For his troubles, Mr Raab ended up the subject of considerable public and media attention: after all, he was refusing to do what the electorate generally expects an MP to do, which is to hear the views of the voters and to represent them.

It seems Mr Raab may have been confusing 38 Degrees with another group because the e-campaign calculated that on average he had received only two emails a day from 38 Degrees supporters who had used their constituency-finding facility to get in touch with him. Even the most time pressed and technophobic MP could probably deal with two emails a day without feeling the need to try and force the senders to desist by calling in the official info-police, in this case the UK Information Commissioner (who refused to do so - read about it in the 38 degrees blog[1]).

The Raab Affair triggered some quietly fevered tactical discussion amongst e-campaigners about the pro's and con's of using various forms of cyber activism, pro and not so forma emails, petitions and tweets and the like, as well as attracting the attention of those more interesting in optimising the relationship between state, legislature and 'civil society'.

Of course many of the most adept and energetic users of the tools of e-campaigning are relatively new to campaigns and so to participants a bit long in the tooth, much of the debate looked awfully, if dimly familiar. Had there not been similar debates about the effectiveness of letter writing, and whether it's better to have fewer more distinct personal appeals, or many which end up being answered, as it would have been put in another age, "by the government Word Processor", or simply (and sometimes literally), weighed ? Weren't there similar worries about the erosion of 'political life' caused by mass watching of TV rather than mass attendance at political rallies or community hustings ? When radio was first introduced some denounced it as satanic, others predicted it would bring an end to the record industry, and print journalists campaigned against it.

The Emancipatory Revolution is at Stake !

On 12 August the UK Guardian ran a piece by Berkley California based Micah White in the form of a polemic against 'clicktivism', which he accused of 'ruining leftist activism'. This framed the topic in rather grander terms. White writes well, and he *began "A battle is raging for the soul of activism. It is a struggle between digital activists, who have adopted the logic of the marketplace, and those organisers who vehemently oppose the marketisation of social change. At stake is the possibility of an emancipatory revolution in our lifetimes"*. (Read the piece - it's good on history, such as the origins of MoveOn).

For oldies like me though, White's diatribe is also familiar. Railing against 38 Degrees (www.38degrees.org.uk), or MoveOn (www.MoveOn.org), or Avaaz (www.avaaz.org) or GetUP (www.getup.org.au) because they use the tools of 'marketing' or were inspired or developed by people from the commercial sphere, or because they enable action or affiliation without a thorough intellectual process, or because they don't conform to an ideal form of political or social movement, is an accusation driven by a demand for ethical clarity, and a desire to dictate terms of the 'true belief'. It is much the same as we heard in the past from followers of Naomi Kline and No Logo, who attacked any engagement with corporates, or anything with a 'logo' (including big NGOs). In the UK in the 1980s and 1990s there were similar criticisms from disgruntled Marxists or Trots who disliked the capacity of environmental campaign groups to attract public attention. (Some became climate sceptics. It's hard to resist the temptation to

think that it might have been motivated by a bit of attention jealousy). Campaign groups they argued, were using the wrong tools to do the wrong things. The true path lay elsewhere. Results must only be obtained in the 'right' way. It's been the cry of Concerned Ethicals [3] down the ages.

Moments like the Raab Affair give an opportunity for pundits to pursue their arguments about ways and means but campaigners should not spend too much time worrying about it, and should pay most attention to people who are actually doing such campaigning, rather than to those who are theorising about it and making polemical points.

Micah White ended his article in The Guardian:

"Against the progressive technocracy of clicktivism, a new breed of activists will arise. In place of measurements and focus groups will be a return to the very thing that marketers most fear: the passionate, ideological and total critique of consumer society. Resuscitating the emancipatory project the left was once known for, these activists will attack the deadening commercialisation of life. And, uniting a global population against the megacorporations who unduly influence our democracies, they will jettison the consumerist ideology of marketing that has for too long constrained the possibility of social revolution."

Or, as Marx and Engels had it [4]:

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!

Well, they all have a point but for those not yet in a position to overthrow the marketing industry or ready to cast off their broadband, here are a few thoughts about e-campaigning and clicktivist tendencies.

Avoiding Mis-Clicks

A lot of the debates about e-campaigning techniques inside NGOs - and within the e-campaigning community of 'suppliers' and their clients - are typical 'channel' discussions, dominated by what the technology can do, and ideas for what else it might be able to do, because it is a relatively new technology. In other words, competence in using the technology doesn't extend very far or very evenly into many of the organisations - especially the older more established ones - so there is a tendency for decision-making to become technology-led, and isolated from other areas of expertise.

In that respect I've got some sympathy for those who sound a cautionary note, although I don't personally hold with the view that e-campaigning is a manifestation of some sort of undesirable political belief system (demonized as 'marketing', standing in for 'capitalism') which all right-minded people should be against. In my view it's more similar to the problem we used to have with 'the media' and in particular, with TV. Campaigners and campaign organisations can become fixated with the means, or with outputs, rather than outcomes. Clicks, newspaper inches, Weighted-Opportunities-To-See, or minutes of prime time - all may be important but all may also be irrelevant to achieving an outcome.

If an organisation becomes too besotted with its competence in one of these areas, its effectiveness can suffer. In the late 1980s for example, Greenpeace had become very effective at getting itself, or its 'message' onto TV news. TV as a whole had begun to carry more and more 'environmental' programming (much more than today). In the early 1990s when I was involved in re-strategizing Greenpeace in the UK, it was taken as read by many (reinforced by the perceptions of people outside that publicity must mean influence and success) that profile was a good proxy for success. Fortunately for that organisation it retained some tendency to self-criticism. So when we discovered (from the dreaded focus groups) that people had seen so

much coverage of 'environmental problems' on tv, and encountered so little communication of them elsewhere, that they had begun to think they existed 'on tv', we tried to do something about it by planning 'direct communication' - to try and make it real 'on the street'.

Clearly there is some risk that something similar can now affect 'e-campaigning', if campaigners themselves start to believe that campaigns can be planned, fought and won purely 'online'. Such a view is plainly ridiculous if you stop to think about it, so the main danger is from people who might be involved in planning resources and activities but who don't stop to think about it. As Johnny Chatterton of 38 Degrees says: *"you do hear people saying that e-campaigning is 'the future' and that campaigns will just be conducted online but none of them seem to actually work in e-campaigning"*.

Have a Critical Path

So what's the best defence against this ? I'd suggest plan a campaign leading to a real change objective, with a properly researched Critical Path of steps which have to come about in order to make that real-world change happen. This forces you to understand the dynamics of the process you are trying to influence, and creates natural milestones which define progress and successs - or lack of it. It is reaching these change-points rather than the outputs which may be deemed necessary to try and get there, which should be used to judge success. That makes numbers engaged online, or particular actions by particular online campaigners or supporters, a means and not an end. (See critical path pieces at www.campaignstrategy.org under 12 Basic Guidelines and in extracts from *How To Win Campaigns*).

This is a difference between tactics and strategy - the critical path must lead to the strategic outcome, while the tactics are used to help you get along the way. Without a critical path you may have an end goal in mind but then no way of knowing whether a particular tactical activity - be it online or offline - is 'working'. How many meetings with politicians, how many direct actions or letters written, how many advertising billboards, community events, website visits or click through conversions are needed ? There's no way of telling. Don't let enthusiasm for particular tactics replace a critical path strategy.

Understand Your Audiences

The same factors that ought to be researched in planning and testing a critical path will answer the question, "how should we approach this audience ?" - from an individual MP, to 'consumer' or 'citizen' Mr Smith, to the Chair of a multinational.

This means understanding:

- their potentials - what could they do? Obviously if they can't do what you want them to do then they are the wrong target but campaigners don't always know that

- their motivation - their personal psychology, their interests and relationships: where 'they are at' ?

- their situation - what commitments do they have, what are they concerned about, and what's the culture around them ?

- who and what influences them - is there a relevant track-record ?

- their experiences, preferences and perceptions: what frames will they use, how will they interpret an approach from you, or from another source ?

This sort of fine -tuned approach, which is most typical of the Public Affairs lobbying industry, or consumer marketing research aimed at specific segments, is a resource intensive process. But depending upon your critical path strategy it may well be the most cost effective thing to do. Simply because you may have a way to reach very large numbers of people, either as

messengers or as recipients of those messages, doesn't mean to say it's the best course of action to do that.

It's the risk Abraham Maslow pointed to when he said: *"if the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail"*. For campaign groups the tempting 'hammer' often used to be media coverage: now it can be online 'activism'. So yes 'clicktivism' can be a problem but it's not an *a priori* philosophical question of whether online campaigning is good or bad: the truth is that it depends on the need and situation. Developing a good critical path plan, will show what the need is.

Plan Communications with an Audience from 360 degrees

Use tools like CAMPCAT (see www.campaignstrategy.org) to think about which channels, contexts and messengers you might use - whether online or offline. If there's a high value target, then try brainstorming their lives, their day at home, travelling, at the office etc etc - and think about how you can generate signs and signals and 'messages' from as many different sources and events as possible, which lead them to conclude what you want them to conclude. If someone arrives at a conclusion in their own heads, by making a 'discovery' or putting 2+2 together, even if you've indirectly provided those '2s', it is much more convincing and more likely to 'stick' than if they hear from you by direct advocacy.

Sometimes expressing the scale of public concern or interest is just what is needed, and overt e-messages may be a way to do that, possibly the best way but it's not always going to be the case, and that alone is unlikely to be the optimal approach.

It might also help to think about using heuristics, eg 'liking'. If you first get the audience to like you, they are more likely to accept asks or take up your offers. If that's hard work then maybe you can find someone or something they do like to use as the channel or messenger. Start from where they are, not where you are.

Another relevant heuristic is 'effort' - if someone walks for months to bring a petition to your door, it's rather different from receiving it by email. The more effort is implied in the communication, the more impact it's likely to have.

Think About the Consequences

Lastly, think through and map out the of success or failure. It's usually hard to run a campaign without breaking a few metaphorical omlettes because a campaign, as opposed to a social marketing exercise, is in some way about challenging or subverting or circumventing power. If there wasn't a power problem, it probably wouldn't be necessary to run a campaign in the first place. So consider the supposed effect of annoying a target or changing his or her power or relationships (etc) and don't go on supposition - take steps to find out about it from those, in a position to know.

Here you need to telescope forwards in time - ask yourself about the next steps if this campaign succeeds. Does it matter if you burn a few bridges ? Would it be worthwhile ? This also relates to organisational strategy, and is why it's very hard for an organisation which is a delivery body, expected to fit in and achieve harmonious close working with all its 'partners', to also be a campaign group, seeking to change the architecture of the system.

Those Annoying People

The likes of 38 Degrees are, as my friend from a large NGO wryly put it, a bit annoying because the larger, more established groups would like to do what they do. They can see that sometimes it works extremely well. Sometimes these newer, lighter, quicker, mechanism-providing organsiations, are doing things and saying things which older, duller, bigger ones cannot. In the time honoured tradition of commerce, they have taken the bit of the business that a lot of people

want - in this case the agency-giving, action-generator part - and made that work quicker, bigger and better, while cutting out much of the overhead and the rest of the 'package' which campaigning citizens don't necessarily want to buy.

The role or niche of these new organisations has yet to settle. The more established groups might fairly point out that they are in a way parasitic on them for depth research etc - and they just pick the juiciest most clearly winnable, most dramatic moments to call their campaign divisions over. Not for Avaaz or 38 Degrees the long slow hard slog of building a presence in an obscure policy community, the costly attendance at dozens of 'prepcoms' before the drama of the big ticket political showdown at the Conference of Parties, or work on an issue so far from 'breaking' that hardly anybody has even heard of it [Visit for example the website of the Radiation Research Trust (www.radiationresearch.org) for one that I predict will be on the radar of the clicktivists in a few years time]. Or that's how the leviathan NGOs might see it.

These new groups are more like the news media, or, to be more precise, the newspapers and tv channels in the mass-media pre-online age which used to 'campaign'. After showing no interest in a campaign for years, in the UK a 'campaigning' newspaper such as the *Daily Mirror* or *The Observer* would decide the moment had come to launch a 'campaign' which might take just a week to execute, and would both delight and infuriate a charity or pressure group whose files and contacts would be plundered in a lop-sided deal to 'raise the profile' of the topic in question. It sold newspapers, and because TV did its research by reading the 'papers, sometimes secured NGOs some premium airtime. Having knocked down a fairly easy target by utilising far more pulling power than any NGO could, the media outlet would declare a 'victory' and, egos boosted all round, turn its attention elsewhere.

Today 'everything' is online, so there's no deficit of information 'on issues' but of organisation and opportunities to use it. This is what these new wave groups are providing. And because the files and case studies are mainly put online by the larger NGOs themselves, there's not much they can do to stop 'people' - whether their paid up supporters or simply sympathetic members of the public, from taking the opportunity to join in a *Big Click*.

Since its inception in May 2009, 38 Degrees has facilitated nearly a million 'actions' by individuals on topics from health services to disclosure of lobbying to factory farming. Its fastest time from consideration to campaign launch was 19 minutes (in the Trafigura injunction case - which was 'won' the same day) and its list of supporters grew from zero to 130,000 in 42 months. Facebook, twitter and most of all, e-mails are its primary tools. Taking Avaaz, G38, GetUp and MoveOn into account, there are almost ten million people directly engaged by such groups. Your guess is as good as mine but I'd be surprised if that wasn't increased tenfold in a few years.

Because they largely lack assets on the ground in many countries, such groups may do things which more established groups would not, especially those also involved with service delivery or advocacy in highly hazardous areas like defending human rights. Of course they will make mistakes and that will change them but they are an expression of the potentials in society - online and offline - and are helping meet an unmet need for 'agency'.

One person in a discussion at FairSay's e-campaign forum [5] pointed to this comment:

"When you are a housewife with 5 kids, a fulltime job, financial issues, and mismanaged stress, supporting Iran or Kyrgyzstan or China is not going to be your #1 priority. But you still care – so you RT a link. Or two. And then three. There is nothing wrong with that, it's actually encouraged to get involved in every "little" way you can, and tweeting counts. This is the only way you can tap into audiences that would otherwise not be inspired to think and possibly act upon these global issues that affect us all."

(http://www.mideastyouth.com/2010/08/12/is-digital-activism-ruined/)

It is likely that e-campaign groups will continue to target corporate and political targets which are momentarily vulnerable. Older larger NGOs are threatened by them just as emergence of

'ethical' offers by businesses eroded their old mass-media based dominance of agency (see www.campaignstrategy.org/golden_age.doc). They may stand to lose generations of supporters who might otherwise have turned to them - unless they make similar offerings.

It's also possible that some people (particularly the Inner Directed Pioneers) may start engaging with a subject by taking an action with a group like Avaaz or 38 Degrees and then move on to deeper involvement elsewhere. It's not however just a question of how much an established organisation knows about a subject, or how engaged it's staff are with an issue but also of how much it offers followers the opportunity to participate.

The other thing that marks these new groups out from older ones - and makes them rather more like media outlets - is their eclecticism. 38 Degrees for example has a campaign on factory farming but has also campaigned about the fate of a BBC radio station, and the UK National Health Service. For older style NGOs this is puzzling. As I heard someone from an animal welfare group say to Johnny Chatterton of 38 Degrees a week or so ago *"But what happens next ? I mean you're not really a Cow Organisation, are you ?"*

Gerd Leipold, former International Director of Greenpeace sees this as part of a wider trend: *"Young people having less permanent affiliation to organisations and to causes"* he says. *"At the same time large number of people can be mobilised faster than ever. There is increasing competition for NGOs from companies, wealthy private individuals and foundations. The traditional influence of NGOs on policy making is being increasingly challenged by other actors - private individuals, new type foundations, big consultancy companies - who have learned from NGOs how to influence politics."* We shall see.

 [1] http://blog.38degrees.org.uk/2010/08/09/dominic-raab-tells-constituents-dont-email-me

[2] Micah White, Clicktivism is ruining leftist activism, Reducing activism to online petitions, this breed of marketeering technocrats damage every political movement they touch, The Guardian Thursday 12 August 2010 http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruining-leftist-activism

[3] see Using Values Modes at www.campaignstrategy.org

[4]http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch04.htm - as one person (ECF discussion) commented on reading Micah's last paragraph "I almost broke out in the 'Internationale' on reading this"

[5] http://fairsay.com/events/ecampaigning-forum/2008/front-page

Using OODA in Campaigns ?

For years I've been telling campaigners in training sessions that they need to be proactive, and telling public bodies, businesses and others in communications training that in any struggle, the more proactive party tends to win. It's not rocket science to see that agility is one of the few advantages that most NGOs have over most companies or official bodies - if they chose to use it.

Many effective campaigners tend to know this and to use it intuitively. Some do so to the point where they do little else apart from using their best tactics to get ahead of their opponents, set the pace, frame the debate and stay there. Sometimes of course that's not enough and they lose because they've not sufficiently stacked the odds by other elements of their strategy, or they've picked the wrong moment to pick a fight, or because they've picked the wrong battleground.

Although there are endless lists of tactics, there seem to be relatively few good tools to sort and organise them in 'real time'. So I'm not sure how I was so dim as to miss it but until recently I'd never come across 'OODA'. I expect many readers of this Newsletter already know OODA but for those who don't, OODA or the 'OODA Loop' is a tactical system that was invented by US Air Force Officer Jim Boyd, and stands for Observe, Orient, Decision and Action. In its simplest form

it says that if you can 'get inside' the OODA loop of your opponent, that is, do O-O-D-A more quickly, you can out-manoeuvre your opponent.

Boyd was a fighter pilot and of course not all campaigning is like a 1:1 dogfight but many campaigns are like that at times. In those cases OODA can probably be usefully applied. Once your campaign goes 'live', OODA is more or less unavoidable because by making one change to reality, you change the reality. This also places a premium on knowing the (next) objective in a critical path (see online campaign discussion above), so your decision making can be led by the objective not the method. And it means that your campaign 'fighting' unit needs to be as much like a 'weapons platform' as possible, and as least like a faculty or bureaucracy as possible, because otherwise it will not be able to make decisions and implement them fast enough. That's a frequent failing of organisations who try to campaign without changing a structure and decision making structure designed for a different way of working. You can't win a dogfight by committee.

You can read about Boyd's work online for example at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OODA_loop and see numerous applications available for the Googling, for instance on decision making and the 'Theory of Constraints'at
http://www.dbrmfg.co.nz/Thinking%20Process%20Cloud%20OODA.htm and on competitive strategies in business at

http://www.managers.org.uk/practical-support/management-community/blogs/ooda-loop.

There's also plenty of discussion online about OODA in politics - with some writers crediting OODA successes to Obama, and others pointing to moments in his Presidential campaign where he lost it to McCain.

I'd be interested to hear what use, if any, readers have made of OODA in campaigns, and whether anyone has succeeded in adapting it as a campaign tool.

Book

The Second Edition of my book 'How To Win Campaigns', is to be published by Earthscan later this month - due on 28 September. Updated and extended. You can order it here:
http://www.earthscan.co.uk/?tabid=102418