10 “Old” Ideas for Using Technology in Macro Practice in New Ways

1. **Phone banking:** Online phone banks have improved the efficacy of this tool, by allowing for more specific targeting, layering in unique messages and the use of adaptive technology like language interpretation, and allowing for patch-through calls where an organizer/phone banker connects the person being called directly to the target, facilitating the communication (and, in some cases, actually listening in to see how it goes). Popular in recent years have been ‘virtual marches’, where 800 numbers are established to allow hundreds of thousands of people to call the same number(s) on the same day(s), crippling the phone system and drawing intense attention to the issue.

2. **Online petitions:** Petitioning is a tried-and-true community organizing tool—it’s a great way to give people something immediate to do to take action on an issue, it allows organizers to collect contact information, and it can be a great entry point with targets. New technology makes online petitions much more effective—instead of just sending out email forwards or asking people to come in to sign something, organizers can create an online petition at [www.thepetitionsite.com](http://www.thepetitionsite.com), direct their supporters there, and also elicit signatures from the general public who peruse the site looking for issues to support. You can also layer other strategies/resources (such as YouTube video appeals requesting signatures, links from your campaign website, text message appeals, etc…) to increase traffic to your petition.

3. **Targeted walk lists:** The amount of information collected on individuals today allows for increasingly sophisticated targeting when going door-to-door for organizing or fundraising campaigns (for example, you can merge lists so that you have both consumer and voter information on the same households). Applications like Google Earth allow organizers to visually examine a new area before canvassing it—how densely spaced are the dwellings, are they single or multi-family, what landmarks/amenities are nearby? These kinds of questions can help door-knockers to prepare for their conversations with residents. Technology also enhances the contact at the door—for example, you can bring mobile devices that allow you to show people where others interested in the same cause are located, bring up photos of conditions around which you’re organizing, take a credit card contribution, demonstrate how to use the state legislature’s website to look up information… (!)

4. **Email alerts:** Email is still a terrific tool for communicating with supporters and sharing quantities of information quickly and cheaply, but its ubiquity is reducing its effectiveness somewhat; people receive so much unsolicited email, and they know how easily it’s sent, that they sometimes tend to discount it. To make your emails stand out, use a subject heading that is as personalized as possible, include hot links in the email that allow supporters to quickly take action on the issue (for example, a link to click to immediately email the target, or a link to make a donation—the fewer clicks required, the better), and use a good list! Mass emails are best sent to oppositional, not allied targets—since emails ‘count’ for less than other kinds of communication with targets, one of the most effective strategies can be to send so many of them that you effectively shut down a server, ensuring that your message will be noticed.

5. **Organizational web pages:** Every social change organization should have an Internet presence today (and most do), but they vary widely in quality and, therefore, in efficacy. Of course your site needs to be clean, attractive, and easy to navigate, but it should ideally be much more—supporters (and potential allies!) need to be able to make a secure contribution, research your work, find out about your leadership, learn about upcoming events (and sign up to participate), contact someone directly (ideally through IM or a chat feature, but at least through email), and take
action (perhaps through an interface with advocacy software—see below). The key is that your site should be interactive; users should be able to do something, not just read something, by visiting, and the content should be updated frequently enough that people will worry that they’re missing something if they don’t come back often. Allowing people to download things like position papers, presentations, and other tools directly from your site also increase the likelihood that they’ll bookmark it and want to return. Of course, your site should include the capacity to track not only your raw number of visitors but also the pages/items that people click, what is downloaded, and how many contributions (and in what size) come through the Internet. There are A LOT of companies/individuals specializing in nonprofit web design; find one that can provide the functionality you want for the price your organization can afford.

6. **Campaign/issue web pages:** In order to increase their web presence and also sometimes for pragmatic reasons related to the overwhelming traffic on organizational websites, some organizations are establishing separate sites dedicated to particular campaigns in which they are playing a/the lead role. You can obviously link to these sites from the main organizational site, but these pages give you more opportunity to draw traffic from searches related to your issue and also facilitate bookkeeping related to lobbying expenditures, if policy advocacy is a component of your campaign. This is an opportunity, too, to think about your url (and related icon) and to use it to direct traffic to your site. The site [www.socialchangewebsites.com](http://www.socialchangewebsites.com) has examples of some of the best nonprofit/advocacy websites, to give you ideas about what to include.

7. **Conference calls and remote ‘meetings’:** Conference calls, particularly those that provide free linkages to multiple numbers provided that everyone calls a long-distance number (easy to do with the proliferation of cell phones and free long distance) have long been a friend of organizers working with people spread out over large geographic areas, or even in smaller circles where face-to-face meetings are difficult or overly time-consuming. Now, programs like Skype allow for free or low-cost video conferencing, which improves the quality of the remote communication. You can also use applications that allow all participants in the call to view the same online documents, particularly helpful when reviewing strategy planning, providing training, or collaborating to prepare a press release or other messaging document.

8. **Media work:** With more people accessing their ‘traditional’ media in untraditional ways, and with the proliferation of alternative and online-only media, organizers need to think about how to connect to new media outlets and how to make their messages resonate as well online as in print or video/audio form. For some, this means forming new relationships with those who produce content for alternative media. It may mean expanding media lists, producing video press releases, and tracking and sharing online media (in addition to clipping services). When your organization/cause receives good press, you can share it with your supporters and targets (and the general public using these sites) using applications such as Digg, AIM, Newsvine, Reddit, Delicious, or Fark (‘social bookmarking’). You can even start your own radio station, using basic streaming software and upload the files to your website!

9. **Paid advertising:** Just as commercial advertisers are looking to new media markets to ensure that their messages reach consumers, so, too, do advocacy organizations need to think creatively about how to get our messages through. If we start with a good understanding of who our target audience is (either our actual targets or those we most want to mobilize to reach out to our targets), then we can figure out where to place advertisements most likely to reach them—maybe in video games, on progressive blogs or websites, as part of Google’s email advertising, on media sites like Hulu, or as part of podcasts. Technology has also reduced the cost of producing high-quality paid advertising in-house (for example, with the advent of desktop graphic design and video editing).
10. **Advocacy software**: Good advocacy software can increase the response rate from action alerts, improve targeting, manage your lists, integrate vote tracking, provide leadership with feedback on which messages/appeals/lists are working best for your campaign. This software, unlike most of the web-based applications listed below, is not free, but you can often justify such expenditures to your Board/leadership based on the increased efficiency and the enhanced professionalism of your advocacy efforts. These software packages are not, however, as well-suited to local (or even state-level, although they’re much better there) lobbying, or to community organizing/macro practice applications beyond legislative advocacy.

11 “New” Ideas that will be “Old” Soon!

1. **Social networking**: Can be used to generate interest in a campaign or issue, raise funds (especially small contributions from numerous contributors), turn people out for events, connect supporters to each other, test-market particular messages/slogans, and, perhaps most importantly, maintain a sense of connection among those who may not share much in common besides a commitment to your cause. While Facebook and MySpace by far attract the most users, advocacy-specific sites like [www.change.org](http://www.change.org) ensure that a more self-selected audience will connect to your organization and offer applications and content (like expert blogs) that enrich the capacity of your potential advocates. To make your social networking presence most effective, it has to be a ‘destination’—create buzz around the site before it’s launched (so that it is instantly populated), maintain fresh content, and integrate things like video, event photos, blogs, or other real-time media so that people have a reason to constantly maintain contact.

2. **iPhone applications**: These can be created to do a whole host of organizing applications—find your polling place, assign your address book list to political districts (so that you can tell your friends who to call), maintain a list of events to participate in related to your issue/campaign, provide access to policy positions/resources for advocacy, and feed your generated content (YouTube, Flickr, etc…) directly to your base of supporters. Creating your own iPhone ‘app’ requires a developer license and some programming skill; some of the available apps are free, and some have a rather nominal cost.

3. **Twitter**: Each message is limited to 140 characters, and the ‘micro-blogs’ are instantly transmitted to subscribers. Lobbyists can use Twitter to keep supporters connected to fast-developing events in real-time; candidates allow supporters a glimpse into the campaign trail. There is also an iPhone application “Twitterific,” a mobile application for accessing the Twitter network.

4. **YouTube**: Can be used both to disseminate novel content, including PSAs and other advertisements, workshops/training sessions, roleplays, speeches, interactive debates, and other work, and also to allow content to ‘echo’, by multiplying the views of material originally broadcast on more traditional media.

5. **Blogs**: There are at least 10 million web logs in the world, with at least 400,000 new posts everyday. It’s unclear how many people actively read blogs, but what matters for macro practice is that you can take steps to ensure that the people you want to read yours do! You can start a blog for free using many web-based applications (see the list below for a few), or you can integrate a blog format into your organization or campaign webpage. It makes sense to spend some time reading blogs before you begin so that you get a sense of what draws you in as a reader and how to format your work so that it’s accessible and interesting. Some ideas for blog topics,
particularized to your work, of course, include: lobbyist or organizer ‘diaries’ relating the progress on the issue, tutorials that profile grassroots leaders taking action in ways that inspire others to do so, photo and written logs by participants in key events (from multiple perspectives), analysis of current events or popular/academic literature related to your cause, interviews with key leaders/allies/targets…

6. **Flickr**: The online photo album allows organizers to share photographic evidence of events and also post graphic information (think pie charts and the like), and users can post and share their own photos as well. Users can search Flickr images by keyword (think: child welfare, or homelessness, or mental health) and also by organization/user (so that all of your uploads will be stored together). Multiple users can upload to the same organizational profile/event, also, providing a central repository for content from all of your participants.

7. **Text messaging**: 255 million people in the U.S. have mobile phones; 2/3 use texts—this is a much larger ‘market’ than many of these newer technologies, and the potential here is likewise tremendous. Because text messages are often instantly received (and easily sent, and can be longer than Twitter or many other IMs), they are ideally suited to requesting immediate action: go vote today (and here’s the number to call to find out where), call your legislator right now, come to this emergency neighborhood meeting tonight, here’s what just happened in our meeting with the Mayor’s office (now please call her!)

8. **Entertainment/advocacy**: In this category fall things like ringtones comprised of a mashup of then-candidate Obama’s speeches, or videogames that highlight your particular advocacy issue. Some organizations are even working their causes into simulated gaming like Second Life, giving people an opportunity to participate vicariously. You might create a cartoon/online comic book related to your advocacy issue, develop a web-based ‘television’ series, or sponsor an online promotion, complete with a prize, related to advocacy.

9. **Podcasts**: In another attempt to make all of your content ‘echo’, consider creating podcasts of your organization/campaign’s work—events like debates, community forums, accountability sessions, presentations, training sessions; PSAs and other audio or video advertisements; and analysis. You can imbed podcasts into your blogs or websites, which enhances the value and interest of those tools and also creates a stand-alone resource that can be helpful in explaining what your organization is about and generating interest in/buy-in for your position. You can also utilize podcasts created by others; for example, when your organization is featured on a radio or television program, see if you can obtain a podcast of the appearance that can be shared with others for free or in exchange for a donation to your organization (once you have secured the rights!).

10. **Chat rooms and ‘online communities’**: People are forming powerful relationships across distance, even outside of the formal social networking sites. In some cases, these communities are connected to specific interest groups (like pregnancy sites for those having babies during the same month, or sites for those with specific physical or mental illnesses), and in others, they are just linking up in general chat rooms. As the article about the $0.79 advocacy campaign illustrates, these forums can be good ways to mobilize action around a particular issue, particularly if you can generate a sense of urgency, allow for debate and discussion, create an action item that resonates with the sense of community that participants feel, and provide feedback in the same room/forum on the outcome of the action.

11. **Wikipedia**: You can add your own information and ‘spin’ to public knowledge about a particular topic on Wikipedia, where users collectively create and edit content. This allows you to create a
site for your organization, edit content about issue areas relevant to your work, monitor what’s out there about allies and opponents, and even edit content related to your targets.

General Guidelines for Using Technology in Macro Practice

- Remember, no one was ever organized, or inspired, or mobilized for anything just because of the way in which the message reached them; technology is a medium through which your message, and the relationships that you hope to build through the connections that your message helps you to build, can be conveyed to another.

- Whenever possible, ensure that communication is multi-directional; rather than just sending information out (even through the most ‘cutting-edge’ of applications), have people sign up to receive it. With the cost of each transmission reduced (making targeting less essential financially), some campaigns make the mistake of just broadcasting everything, but we still need ways to capture people’s information so that we have as much control over our communication as possible.

- While technology is more widespread than ever before, especially in the U.S., and while some of the newer applications are arguably more accessible (requiring less initial investment), we still must be cautious about assuming that people living in poverty, in certain parts of the country, or in certain ethnic or age demographics will have equal access to and comfort with these same applications.

- Do NOT assume that you have to be the expert in any of these technologies before you can use them in your organizing work. This is a great opportunity to bring leaders in who are already comfortable with these tools, to give them a chance to lead, and to honor their particular assets.

- Remember that the democracy of the Internet also erodes proprietary rules; this often works in our favor, as grassroots organizations in need of high-quality, low-cost materials in the public domain, but we need to be careful of how our work might be appropriated, also. Create pdfs of documents so that they are less easily modified, include a copyright on anything that your organization wants to protect, include explicit language about required permissions and agreed use policies, and consider having an attorney review these policies and your use of others’ material in advance.

- Expect that, especially the first time you use a new technology, it will not work perfectly. This is to be expected—find experts who are willing to help you, plan for time to play around with things, and be flexible if you have to go to Plan B.

- Recognize that, initially, some of the new relationships that you build through emerging technologies will be ‘weak ties’, but that, by inexpensively/easily casting this wide net, you can find some that will strengthen into meaningful advocacy connections.

Resources to Get Started (incomplete list!)
I’d welcome other suggestions—please email me so that I can add them!

Video Sharing
YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/
Brightcove: http://www.brightcove.com/ (not free, but includes creation/editing tools)

Blog programs
Blogger: http://www.blogger.com
Wordpress: http://wordpress.org
Blogdrive: http://www.blogdrive.com/
Blogspot: http://www.blogspot.com
Digg: http://www.digg.com
Reddit: http://www.reddit.com
Delicious: http://delicious.com
Newsvine: http://www.newsvine.com

Photo and Content Sharing
Flickr: http://www.flickr.com/
Creative Commons: http://creativecommons.org/
SlideShare: http://www.slideshare.net/

Social Networking
Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/
MySpace: http://www.myspace.com/

Other Tools
The Petition Site: http://www.thepetitionsite.com
Google Earth: http://earth.google.com/
Institute for Policy, Democracy, and the Internet: http://www.ipdi.org/
Skype: http://www.skype.com/
Conference Call Services: http://www.conferencecall.com/
Sitemeter: http://sitemeter.com/ (tracks traffic to your site)
Mashable (The Social Media Guide): http://mashable.com/ (has “how to's” on almost everything related to social media, with a lot of examples)
Second Life: http://secondlife.com
Social Change Websites: http://www.socialchangewebsites.com/
Zamzar: http://www.zamzar.com (free online file conversions)
To create a ‘favicon’ (icon with your url): http://www.ehow.com/how_4871335_create-url-icon.html?ref=fuel&utm_source=yahoo&utm_medium=ssp&utm_campaign=yssp_art
Social Actions: http://www.socialactions.com/share-actions (creates plugins and other tools to facilitate advocacy/charity for social causes by embedding these within web applications)
TechSoup: http://www.techsoup.org/ (technical assistance for nonprofits—includes online forums for discussion and help)
IdealWare: www.idealware.org (helps nonprofits choose effective software)
Community Media & Technology Program: http://www.cpcs.umb.edu/cmt/resources.html

Advocacy Software (only a partial list)
The Soft Edge: http://www.thesoftedge.com/index.htm
Action Studio: http://www.actionstudio.org/ (pretty affordable—used by some nonprofits I know)
Capitol Advantage: http://capitoladvantage.com/ (used by many DC-based organizations)

Alternative Media
Common Dreams: http://www.commondreams.org 
Alternet: http://www.alternet.org/ 
Free Press: http://www.freepress.net/ 