

DON'T JUST SIT THERE

ELI PARISER'S E-MAIL REVOLUTION

JAMIE PASSARO

On September 12, 2001, Eli Pariser sent an e-mail to thirty friends asking them to contact their senators and representatives with a message that revenge and more violence weren't the answer to the terrorist attacks. He provided the recipients with an online form letter that enabled them to act quickly. He was twenty, a recent college graduate living in an apartment in Boston. It felt like something he could do.

The e-mail set off a chain of events that would lead Pariser to devote himself to a new kind of political organizing, one that reaches people through their e-mail in-boxes. Through its anti-war efforts, MoveOn.org, the group for which Pariser now works, has grown to 1.6 million members in the United States.

I signed on to MoveOn.org last winter after hearing about it at an antiwar rally in Eugene, Oregon. Like a lot of people I know, I wanted to do more to voice my opposition to the impending war and to the Bush administration, but I was frustrated. What could we really do?

Then Pariser's e-mails began showing up in my in-box. He gave me petitions to sign and asked me to call my Congressional representatives (and provided their phone numbers in case I didn't have those handy). His e-mails made me feel connected to something larger than any single antiwar protest.

Pariser began his activist career at age five, when he picketed in his driveway in rural Maine with a sign that said, "Nature's great. Don't take it away." He learned about activism from his parents, who had protested the Vietnam War and cofounded an alternative high school in Camden. (They divorced when Pariser was seven.) As a teen, Pariser attended Simon's Rock College of Bard in western Massachusetts, where he and some other students convinced the school to compost its kitchen waste, and Pariser became involved in the anti-globalization movement.

After college, Pariser and ten of his friends decided to create a Web documentary called The American Story Project. Their plan was to take a three-month road trip to interview Americans about the way they perceive politics. They spoke with 150 people in fifteen cities, from Morgantown, West Virginia, to Oakland, California. Pariser still has the audiotapes in his

apartment and hopes to get them online at some point. Since September 12, 2001, however, he hasn't had much free time.

Within a few days, the e-mail he'd sent to friends had been forwarded to hundreds of people. Pariser created a website called 911-peace.org, which he later merged with an online petition calling for "moderation and restraint." (The site is no longer active, but several sites with similar names exist.) By October, when Pariser sent the petition to George W. Bush and other world leaders, it had been signed by half a million people all over the world.

The petition caught the attention of MoveOn.org, an activist website established during the Clinton-impeachment hearings to urge Congress to censure Clinton and "move on." MoveOn's executive director, Peter Schurman, called Pariser to ask for his help with MoveOn's "Justice, Not Terror" petition, then ended up hiring him to be the organization's international campaigns director.

MoveOn seemed to be in the air during those spring months before the war with Iraq. Its membership tripled. Today the staff of five continue to get the organization's members fired up about political issues through e-mail alerts and campaigns. Pariser spends ten-hour days corresponding with members, attending phone conferences with other activists, and setting up such events as MoveOn-sponsored speeches by Al Gore. A couple of times a week, he sends out an e-mail message to MoveOn's 1.6 million U.S. members.

Like his e-mails, Pariser himself is direct and optimistic. He's humble about being twenty-two and having such an important job. "It really is the best job I could possibly have," he says. He's a fast learner, but he admits that this doesn't make up for lack of experience. "I sometimes compare it to walking a tightrope without any training," he says. "But I have good support from my co-workers, especially Wes Boyd," one of MoveOn's founders.

Pariser and I talked by phone several times in August and September 2003. He answered my questions easily, and I quickly forgot I was talking to someone in his early twenties. He describes himself as an "idealistic pragmatist." Sometimes his words carried the power of a passionate, sincere stump



speech, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Though he's focused on MoveOn for now, Pariser says he could imagine running for office in the future. He's still got a couple of years to go before he's old enough to run for a House seat.

Passaro: The other day, in downtown Eugene, I saw the words "Stop Bush" and "MoveOn.org" chalked on a sidewalk.

Pariser: Chalking the streets is not anything we ask people to do, but MoveOn does encourage people to take initiative. With a staff of five, it's not possible for us to organize everything ourselves. But we believe that if you point people in the right direction, they will take appropriate action and be successful.

For example, we said, "It would be great if people organized candlelight vigils. Can you help?" Four days later, we had 6,700 candlelight vigils happening all over the world. Some vigils had hundreds of participants. They sent a very powerful message about global opposition to the Iraq war.

People drew the conclusion from the dot-com failure that there wasn't much you could do with the Internet. It turns out that there are lots of things you can do with the Internet; it's just not that easy to make a profit.

Passaro: What is it about e-mail that engages people?

Pariser: E-mail's an interesting medium because, on the one hand, it allows the five of us in MoveOn to reach out — virtually for free — to an enormous number of people at once. Though it's essentially a broadcast medium, it's also a personal one, because people get e-mail mostly from friends and acquaintances. The relationship we have with our members is significantly different from the relationship fostered by direct mail. People say to me, "I feel like I know you." It's partly a function of the direct and honest tone we use. We don't treat people as consumers or a target market.

E-mail also allows us to coordinate and organize with unprecedented speed. The 6,700 vigils are a perfect example. Another advantage is being able to speak to our members in the present emotional moment. When something big happens, we're able to react in hours as opposed to days or weeks. Just when people are thinking, *I need to do something*, our e-mail appears and says, "Here's something you can do."



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And there's the ease of use. E-mail allows people to sign a petition or e-mail their congressperson with the click of a button. Once people take that first step toward getting involved, it's much easier for them to take the next, bigger step.

The way MoveOn grows is that members pass e-mails on to their friends. Every new member comes to us through the endorsement of a friend or colleague. It's a different experience to receive an e-mail from someone you know than to get an impersonal invitation to participate in a rally or join an organization.

The kind of stature that MoveOn has attained over the last few months is surprising to us. We hadn't expected to draw a large-enough constituency to be taken seriously by presidential candidates. Politicians are shocked to

find out just how large our organization is. That makes sense, because this is about the political leadership being out of touch with what the people want.

Passaro: MoveOn continues to gain momentum where other activist groups have self-destructed over disagreements. How do you account for its success?

Pariser: Part of it is that we listen to our members. In the advocacy world people can easily become too concerned with "inside baseball" and stop listening to the grass roots.

At the same time, we try to lead. Many movements attempt to have direct democracy, with everyone doing the decision making. I think most people who participate don't want to make decisions. They'd just as soon trust us to figure out the strategy and let them know what to do. That's the key service MoveOn provides: to tell people, "This is a time when it's important to take action."

All of our actions are essentially ad hoc. It's rare for us to have any standing volunteers. We don't want to be another chapter-based organization. We like the idea of offering everyone an opportunity to get involved, even if they don't have the time to do it on a regular basis.

It's taken a while, but we're beginning to realize just what the capacity of the Internet is. It's ironic that MoveOn is booming two or three years after the dot-coms went bust. People drew the conclusion from the dot-com failure that there wasn't much you could do with the Internet. It turns out that there are lots of things you can do with the Internet; it's just not that easy to make a profit.

Passaro: A part of me questions anything that contributes to people spending more time alone at their computers rather than talking to their families and friends and neighbors. Does cyberactivism contribute to isolation and complacency — the idea that I can sign this petition and then go back to watching TV?

Pariser: MoveOn does just the opposite. It connects people rather than isolates them. Sure, you might spend five minutes at your computer finding out where there's a vigil in your area, but then you're off to meet new people. Cyberactiv-

ism can bring people with common interests together in a way that's not governed by social restrictions, but is fundamentally democratic. It's open rather than closed.

Your comment about complacency implies that people are choosing between taking a direct action and just signing an e-mail. The truth is that the majority of people who sign e-mail petitions are not the ones who lie down in the street. For many people, the choice is not sign the petition or do something; it's sign the petition or do nothing. Once they sign the petition, they're in the loop, and they might develop an interest in doing more.

Passaro: Two years ago today, on September 12, 2001, you sent an e-mail to thirty friends asking them to contact their representatives in Congress with the message that war wasn't the answer. What were you thinking about when you sent that e-mail?

Pariser: It was a difficult time, because many people felt they had to stand behind the president no matter what, and here I was, asking them to tell him what to do. It was encouraging for me to discover that hundreds of thousands of people agreed we were heading down the wrong path. People still come up to me and say how important it was to have their feelings affirmed.

Passaro: At a peace rally in New York City last February, you said, "For each person who's here, there are a hundred who weren't able to make it. I know: I get e-mail from them. They're ordinary, patriotic, mainstream Americans."

Pariser: The media keep wanting to portray the opposition as radical activists, when in fact MoveOn is mostly made up of people who are part of the political mainstream. Some of them don't even consider themselves left-wing. These are people who think we're a country that does good, that we jump in and save the day. In this case, though, we were attacking a country that posed no threat to us and that we could easily have defeated through other means. It just didn't fit with their vision of America.

Passaro: Do you believe the U.S. has been "a country that does good"?

Pariser: I think we do both good and harm, like most countries. It's just that, with the power we have, the harm and the good are much greater.

Passaro: Do you think MoveOn's antiwar campaign was effective?

Pariser: It depends on how you define *effective*. We didn't stop the war. But it's the public's job to voice its opinion, and it's the president's job to listen. Our actions gave the president and the nation's leaders the opportunity to show what kind of listeners they are. They decided to ignore the call for peace.

It was a defining moment for the Bush presidency. Though hundreds of thousands of ordinary people were speaking out, the leadership paid them no mind. That gave people a clear sense of why George W. Bush is a fundamentally poor leader for our country: He doesn't listen. He doesn't care about representing the populace.

Passaro: Some people would say that he was listening to the majority who ended up being in favor of the war.

Marching in the streets certainly has an effect, but we shouldn't underestimate the power of making a heartfelt case to someone in power. . . . It's hard to ignore real people telling you that you're doing something wrong.

Pariser: But that was after it had begun. Initially, people were against it. The only way Bush got a majority to grudgingly support the war was by feeding them what we now know was an endless stream of misinformation.

Passaro: But Bush's popularity polls remain high.

Pariser: I think people like him as a person. He appears to be an earthy, compassionate guy. But if you were to present the president's policies to the public, minus his rhetoric, people wouldn't like them. The president has mastered the art of saying one thing and doing something else.

The true test of a president is, when he asks the American people to do something difficult, do they do it? This president hasn't asked us to do anything. Even in his tax policy, he's putting the real burden on future generations.

Passaro: In 1976 Howard Zinn wrote that the United States will "go from spectator democracy to real democracy when we understand that the future . . . doesn't depend, mainly, on who is our next president. It depends on whether the American citizen, fed up with high taxes, high prices, unemployment, waste, war, and corruption, will organize."

Pariser: Marching in the streets certainly has an effect, but we shouldn't underestimate the power of making a heartfelt case to someone in power. Even when politicians get calls that are obviously part of a grass-roots campaign, even when they know rationally that these calls are not a representative sample, the calls still have a psychological impact, because it's hard to ignore real people telling you that you're doing something wrong.

Of course, no action is effective in a vacuum. Whether you're calling or e-mailing or writing letters, it has to be connected to a larger campaign. If you contact a member of Congress now about the \$87 billion bill for rebuilding Iraq, it has weight and context. If you contact them about aid to the Sudan, your message is much less likely to be noticed.

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