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Building Online Power

Cayden Mak



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In order to contend for power online, we are intentionally and rigorously interfacing with some of the most insidious parts of surveillance capitalism. As we do so, we're trying to adjust the expectation for what organizing can look like online. A movement organization is more than a brand: brands are produced for consumption, but a movement is space for participation and power.

To abandon the internet as a site of struggle is not just to give into corporate power, as they work to enclose the online commons. It's also to concede a vast and undefined territory to the far right – cults of conspiracy, white supremacy, and violent nationalisms that run rampant even in seemingly mainstream online spaces.

We live in a time of tremendous opportunity for online action. Beyond the work that we have already done at 18MR, there's a constantly expanding horizon for what we *could* do. For instance, the possibilities for new kinds of international solidarities in a time of increasing authoritarianism and state repression are underexplored. The global pandemic also means more people are seeking belonging online, which is an opportunity and a threat.

The internet itself will not yield transformation and greater freedom unless we act on it strategically and in alignment with our values. It's my hope that this offering can be of use as we contend for power on the internet, using the internet.

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it's more likely that you're turning out support from people who have already been activated around the issue in the past. The form is useful when you're trying to convince a target with power to act in ways that benefit your community or prevent harm. However, the form doesn't *necessarily* lead to building power.

At 18MR, we think of our collective efficacy in more than one way. First, we do acknowledge the way mass mobilization tactics serve many of our goals. We keep these tools in our toolbox for this reason, and they're clearly legible to members. However, we also know that there is work to do that doesn't involve asking a legislative body to pass or repeal a law or a judge to grant a stay on a deportation order, for instance. Especially through principled collaboration with other movement organizations that specialize in other forms of organizing, we're able to model action that is expansive and generative.

Exploring – and sometimes developing – new tools for our people to see and experience collective efficacy online pushes us toward new forms. I'm particularly interested in finding forms that emphasize depth over breadth and create space for personal as well as social transformation. I'm interested in a much more nuanced field of practice that is also about how we build the future world in our everyday relationships, as well.

Building the Internet for Movements, Not Brands

You may have noticed that these five questions are deeply intertwined. I don't think that they're questions you answer once and then proceed to develop campaigns. They're meant to be a guide to an iterative process of asking difficult questions about what you're doing online, how, why, and for whom. Engaging uncritically with technology means having our work dictated by the constraints of that technology.

Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, likes to claim that his company's goal is to bring all the world's people closer together through networking. That's a truly astounding fiction, as Facebook – and effectively all of the firms dominating the internet today – are motivated to capture all of human experience as “behavior” from which they can extract value in order to sell more advertising.

But what if the internet wasn't just a medium for extracting the raw materials of this new means of production? What if we treated the internet seriously as a place – a location where people spend their work and leisure time, not just in transit, but in community? There is more than one way to do politics and build a community on the internet, and in spite of the current dominance of surveillance capitalism as the model for governing the web, it is not the logical conclusion of the technology itself. Rather, it's the consequence of social, political, economic, and legal processes, as Shoshana Zuboff argues in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*.¹

The internet as we experience it is a designed system that is itself the result of systems of power that are much older, and perhaps less visible, than it is. Therefore, it is possible – and necessary – to contest for power online. However, our existing models for online organizing are heavily focused on mass mobilization, utilizing the web as a communications medium connecting interested individuals to organizations and one another.

At 18 Million Rising, we've been at the forefront of trying to figure out how to move away from the mass mobilization/communications model of online organizing and toward models that foreground humans and, hopefully, help foster a different kind of internet. Founded as an organization specializing in mass mobilization through email and petitions, we've evolved to include a variety of other tactics while keeping those tools in our toolbox for strategic moments. We primarily organize young Asian Americans, a group of people more heavily online than any other race/age demographic, and for whom belonging may be particularly elusive. Our generation, often stuck between the home cultures of our par-

ents and their homelands and the popular and political culture of the United States, frequently struggles to find belonging offline.

To make matters more complex, the term “Asian American,” in the popular imagination, spans a universe of stereotypes that young Asian Americans often feel at war with. The origins of the term, of course, are in the Third World Liberation Front, when Asian American organizers were on the hunt for a descriptor that felt new, fresh, and relevant to the political work they were undertaking. Since the 70s, the term has been defanged and turned into an almost meaninglessly general census category. Also since the 70s, who *might* count as Asian Americans has been shaped by U.S. imperialism, immigration policy, and globalization, making potential members more diverse, and dividable, than ever before.

18MR’s work is particularly urgent because of the ways the social and economic pressures placed on our generation are separating them from other communities. We’re more likely to have moved to cities away from our families of origin for work. We’re often burdened with heavy debt, while at the same time serving as the young professional or creative vanguard of gentrification in cities across the continent. We’ve watched our civil liberties be eroded by the expanding national security apparatus after 9/11. While young Asian Americans trend leftward, it’s by no means a given that we will be full-throated participants in social movements. And there is an expanding counterweight: the rise of right-wing movements both in our nations of origin and in the United States point to the growing possibility many of our people will be recruited away.

We found, starting very early on, that the people we were most trying to reach were tech savvy and highly skeptical. They were critical and thoughtful, often seeing through the somewhat manipulative clickbait tactics popular at the time, and which still reign in certain digital programs. They were asking earnest questions about what it means to be Asian American – and demonstrated time and time again that they wanted a political home that could

the internet are reflected in our members’ willingness to give us candid feedback, the kinds of rich conversations that happen on our social media posts, and the sense of belonging we foster among our members. Additionally, because the content we create can, and does, get ported across platforms and reposted by other accounts, it’s important that people can immediately identify it as coming from us, no matter where it shows up. Online placemaking is about a critical combination of writing style and design elements with principles, strategy, and affect.

Question Five:

How do we envision our collective efficacy?

All of these things combined together don’t necessarily mean you’re building power. The fifth and final question is exactly about power: when we think about what we do with all the work we put into the first four questions, the fifth asks, to what end?

Strategies that focus only on the community itself fail to contend for power in any meaningful way. While the relationships that are built and the analysis that is developed is critical to success, it is collective action that will keep people coming back for more.

I should also warn that rigorously answering the first four questions should protect you from drifting toward prioritizing the technology itself over the goals of your organizing. Insulating your thinking against the fetishization of particular tools is critical to building a sense of collective efficacy. And an engaged, disciplined membership will also mean you’ll get pushback against campaigns where the form and the analysis don’t align.

What I usually call the “given form” of online organizing will be familiar to most people: the petition and email, often with a thoughtful social media or content strategy thrown in on top. This approach is primarily focused on mass mobilization – deft writers might be able to politicize new folks around an issue this way, but

respond emotionally to news, analysis, and calls to action. It is also mutually constitutive. How we feel about the world around us impacts how we understand our identity in relationship with others.

Understanding that affect can be manipulated, and *manipulative*, is key to differentiating your work *as organizing*. Organizing helps people understand the things they're already feeling. At 18MR, we already know many of the folks who trust us for insight and analysis are used to feeling a particular way about the world. Helping them locate themselves and feel what it feels like to be in right relationship with the world around them is the work of creating belonging.

Question Four:

How does our work engage in placemaking online?

We approach all of the content that we put out, regardless of platform, as a body of work. It's not just about putting together a communications plan for a campaign or project, but rather projecting a sense of place through a combination of aesthetics, analysis, and effective action. It's not about the content itself so much as it's about an approach to the content – we create opportunities for our members to see themselves reflected in our work: their aspirations, values, and visions for the world as it should be, not just as it is.

Placemaking offline originates in city design philosophy that is oriented towards humans instead of catering to motor vehicle traffic or commerce. Principled placemaking is rooted in the ways that local communities already use the spaces in which they live and is informed by input from broad swaths of that community. It also isn't a one-time process, but rather iterative in response to evolving needs.

Therefore, placemaking online needs to be similarly oriented toward human beings. The results of successful placemaking on

host difficult conversations about our role in movements for racial, economic, gender, and environmental justice. We upped our game because we saw those early indicators, and it means our work continues to be robust, relevant, and incisive nearly eight years on.

Five Questions to Use the Internet for Power

These five questions – which I return to on a weekly basis to inform our strategy and tactics – are necessary but not sufficient for the task of treating the internet as a true place. I hope you'll find them useful in your organizing.

Question One:

What principles guide our work online?

Developing a set of shared principles may seem straightforward, but it's critical. There are some tensions that are worth articulating here that we've encountered in developing our own operating principles. While they certainly aren't unique to the internet, the way that people use the internet often amplifies these tensions in our day-to-day work.

In particular, there is a tension between rigidity and flexibility. One of the greatest challenges of building a comprehensive organizing strategy for the internet is the sheer speed and volume of information and interaction. Being clear about what your principles are, while articulating them with the flexibility to respond to a swiftly changing landscape, is vital to being able to make decisions in alignment with your principles in the first place. On the other hand, principles that aren't rooted, that you cannot articulate in alignment with a broader radical tradition, don't serve as bulwarks against the pull of trends or fads.

A strong set of principles can guide your political formation through tricky questions of what tools to use and why; how to

respond to punctuated moments of collective grief, rage, or joy; and keep the collective on track when defining who “your people” are. 18 Million Rising’s operating principles articulate a clear politics of collective action in the service of our anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist analysis that also complicates our relationship with technology itself. While the internet is critical for *how* we do our work, the people remain *why* – fetishizing the tools takes us further from our why. Getting clear, and staying clear, even when the waters you’re navigating are murky, builds trust and allows you to engage in principled struggle within your team and more publicly with others.

Question Two:

Who do we need on our team so we can co-create a transdisciplinary strategy?

We intentionally don’t run 18 Million Rising like a conventional nonprofit. Every day, I’m trying to figure out how to distribute leadership among my small team – composed of individuals with a wide range of relevant skills who are experts in their discipline – in ways that allow us to move forward with deep alignment and help us learn from one another to improve all our efforts.

While you might not be organizing within a formalized structure like we do, these questions are still relevant to developing your team. Division of labor is a necessary consequence of engaging in struggle online: you may need people who think about product and user experience, people who write code, people who produce still and moving images to complement your work, people with the facilitation skills to manage community, people who think about operational security online and addressing threats to the group, or people with any number of a broad host of other skills. There won’t be any one person who has all of them – it’s simply impossible to grapple with the complexity on your own.

To engage in transdisciplinary strategy is to engage in principled struggle across expertise. Being able to consider form and content at the same time – and understand how they are constantly shaping each other – is critical to being effective on the internet. At our best, our team operates from a deep trust of one another and our people, and at a speed where we are constantly sharing and challenging one another to expand our understanding of everything from movement dynamics to tech tools.

While we can’t all master one another’s skills, we *can* share a political analysis of the tools of our respective trades. That analysis can inform both how we show up for each other and what we ask of each other in our day-to-day work. It helps us see the intersections of our expertise and develop an interdependent way of looking at the work that makes every move intentional and considered. Our members respect us for this discipline.

Question Three:

What do we want people to feel, and how do our principles inform the politics of those feelings?

Some theorists of the economy of the internet have argued that the web is an economy of attention – with such a dizzying profusion of content, the thing that comes at a premium is attention. This turns the logic of the era of broadcast media on its head in a way that has broad implications for issues of censorship and speech online. In such an information-saturated environment, how do people make decisions about what they pay attention to?

I like to tell my team that people choose what to pay attention to based on how content makes them feel – what’s the overall *affect*, or emotional content, of your offering? Affect is deeply political: the way we understand ourselves and our groups informs how we