

**R.J. Maratea**

New Mexico State University, U.S.A.

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## Online Claims-Making: The NRA and Gun Advocacy in Cyberspace

**Abstract** This article examines the Internet's emergent role in the claims-making process. My central premise is while Internet technology provides lay citizens with a mass mediated platform to distribute claims publically, power dynamics in the public sphere have remained relatively stable: Insiders and lobbyists continue to be powerful cultural voices; the press still functions as a cultural gatekeeper of newsworthiness; most people continue to have relatively little social authority; and the least powerful risk being completely left out of a digital society. Using the National Rifle Association (NRA) web presence as a case study, I describe the Internet as a vast collection of interconnected public *cyber-arenas* where problem claims are continuously disseminated, global communication is facilitated via online advocacy networks, and claimants utilize novel cyber-strategies to mobilize supporters. In doing so, I examine how cyber-arenas fundamentally differ from more static traditional claims-making arenas like television, radio, and print publication. I conclude by considering the extent to which historically powerful *insider* claims-making groups like the NRA are actually best positioned to succeed in a supposedly democratized new media world.

**Keywords** Claims-Making; Activism; Internet; Online; Cyberspace; Gun Control

**R.J. Maratea** is an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at New Mexico State University. His research focuses on capital punishment and the implications of mass communication as they pertain to deviant and criminal identities, social problem construction, cyber-protest, and the institutionalization of social control. He is the author of *The Politics of the Internet: Political Claims-Making and Its Affect on Modern Political Activism* (2014), as well several articles and book chapters.

**email address:** [rjm@nmsu.edu](mailto:rjm@nmsu.edu)

When James Holmes opened fire in a crowded Aurora, Colorado theater during a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises* on July 20, 2012, major news outlets were quick to report the details of his crime and speculate on possible reasons why something so tragic could happen. Yet prior to the first news report being aired, the story was already unfolding online: Victims' final tweets and Facebook posts chronicled the moments immediately before the shooting; cell phone videos taken inside the theater offered glimpses of the car-

nage; and survivors offered real time updates from the scene. Social media and user-generated news websites offered a minute-by-minute timeline of events, responding so quickly that readers were actually notified when local and national news channels finally posted online their first stories about the shooting. Soon thereafter an array of activists ranging from powerful lobbyists to amateur citizen journalists began bombarding mass media with claims about the causes of mass shootings and what can be done to prevent horrors like these from happening in the future. On television news-casts, in print media, and online, the National Rifle Association (NRA) called for a more heavily armed population in order to better protect citizens, while anti-gun activists demanded legislative reform to restrict firearm availability and access.

In this article, I use gun control activism to examine the degree to which online technology has fostered a dynamic public sphere where claimants with varying degrees of social power have a voice in the social problems process. Specifically, I focus on the Internet's emergent role in shaping how the National Rifle Association (NRA) uses cyberspace to publish claims, shape public opinion, and rally popular support to their causes. Extending Hilgartner and Bosk's (1988) public arenas model of social problem construction, I conceptualize the Internet as a vast collection of interconnected *cyber-arenas* where problem claims are continuously disseminated to audiences and social reality is in a perpetual state of negotiation. I argue the cyber-arenas framework helps contextualize online claims-making by clarifying the shape social problems take in virtual settings, the cyber-tactics used

by claims-makers to attract audiences, acquire resources, and mobilize support, and the ways that claims generated in online environments become part of "real world" offline dialogues. By focusing on how cyber-arenas intersect with these core issues, we may begin to better comprehend the extent to which Internet technology is transforming the social problem process.

### Claims-Making in an Online World

Within the constructionist perspective, mass media's role is to expand the scope of claims so that they can reach the broader population and provide activists with needed public recognition, thereby rallying supporters and mobilizing policymakers into action to rectify the presumed social harm (Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1987; Best 2008). Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) explain that claims-makers compete for public attention by promoting their claims in a variety of public arenas, including mainstream news reports. Because each arena's carrying capacity limits the number of claims that can be addressed at any given time (e.g., newspaper column space, TV airtime), relatively few issues ever become widely recognized as social problems (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Benford and Hunt 2003). This is particularly consequential for *outsider* claims-makers who lack sufficient entrée into both media and government. Whereas insiders, such as pressure groups and lobbyists, often deal directly with policymakers, allowing them to broker deals and manipulate outcomes without first having to pique social interest by attracting media attention to their claims, outsiders have traditionally relied on the press to raise awareness and marshal support for their agendas.

The Internet, however, appears to be transforming the claims-making process because information in cyberspace flows at incredibly fast speeds, has not *yet* been restricted by corporate or governmental structures, and is not hindered by the stringent editorial and budgetary restraints associated with mainstream news production. Claimants with varying degrees of social power and institutional access can therefore bypass traditional media gatekeeping and communicate directly to a global audience of prospective supporters. Consequently, people are no longer restricted to watching a television newscast or reading the morning paper to learn about the issues and claims they deem socially relevant. Today, the Internet facilitates real time communication, and the rapid transfer of large volumes of information can be accomplished at all times and from almost anywhere. The sheer ubiquity of cyberspace is reflected in the seemingly infinite number of access points for all manner of online information. This is because the Internet functions as an interconnected collection of *cyber-arenas*, such as web sites, blogs, and message boards, that are perpetually accessible and in a continuous state of information flux (see: Maratea 2014 for an elaboration). Unlike more traditional modes of news distribution that are fundamentally rigid in nature—print publications have finite column space; television and radio broadcasts have restricted airtime—cyber-arenas are malleable and can fluctuate as needed to accommodate additional claims, data, news reports, and any other relevant content.

Part of the dynamism of cyber-arenas is they can be updated with fresh material in real time and there-

fore offer a greater breadth of information availability while affording audiences more options for locating content. Cyber-arenas are also relatively egalitarian claims-making and protest venues as compared to traditional mass media formats, such as corporatized television, radio, and print publication: Anyone with a computer and an online connection can operate their own web space to publish information, ideas, and opinions in a variety of online settings. While this does not mean Internet users have unfettered access to every cyber-arena found online, the Internet nonetheless allows average citizens and fledgling claimants who have previously been excluded from traditional news cycles to more actively participate in the public sphere and attempt to draw attention to their claims.

Specifically, cyber-arenas allow claimants to shift (or develop entirely new) claims-making, networking, and mobilization structures online where they can be accomplished more efficiently and for less cost (Vegh 2003). Historically, activists have relied on time-consuming tactics, such as cold-calling, direct mailing, staging high-profile public events, and coordinating letter-writing campaigns, to communicate with supporters and mobilize them into action. While sometimes effective, these strategies require extensive resources, intensive planning, and determined public relations work. Web spaces, by contrast, require minimal effort: Claims can easily be posted online and then efficiently updated around the clock. This capacity to function simultaneously as an information sharing and communication structure that is global in scope renders the Internet a powerful yet relatively inexpensive claims-making platform.

At the same time, online technology affords audiences greater control in searching for information. The Internet is replete with millions of readily accessible websites that are independent of the mainline press (Fallows and Rainie 2004). Although it is unreasonable to assume most people have the time or capacity to peruse everything available online, it suggests users can more actively locate materials at their choosing, including content not covered by professional journalists. For example, the Internet has made it possible to view graphic photos and videos deemed inappropriate by network news standards, such as the execution footage of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and the beheading of journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff by Islamic militants. This sort of uncensored information availability is sufficiently profound that it has forced the mainstream media to alter their reporting practices, as evidenced when news outlets elected to air virtually unedited video of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi's corpse being defiled by a mob of civilian rebels on broadcast television newscasts and their websites. To the extent that individuals and groups outside the professional press can use the Internet to influence news coverage and reporting patterns, it stands to reason that online technology can revolutionize the social problems process by providing claimants with unfettered access to mass media on a global scale. Consequently, scholars need to expand their understanding of social problem construction to accommodate the emergent *Internet effect* on claims-making and ways that changes in the availability and consumption of information affect popular understandings of social issues and the distribution of cultural authority in an increasingly interconnected digital world.

## Methodology

Data were acquired from the NRA's primary website, affiliate web pages, and various social media sites, and analyzed using qualitative document analysis (QDA). For QDA to be an appropriate methodological choice, all acquired data—in this case, web pages and all content contained therein—were approached as documents that could be analyzed for both manifest and interpretive content (see: Berg 2006:242). Typically, QDA involves the completion of five research stages: document identification, data collection and protocol design, data coding, data analysis, and integration of findings into a final report (Altheide 1996:23). For this study, data collection involved copying images of every web page on NRA affiliated sites and select social media venues (Facebook and YouTube) into a Microsoft Word file using the print screen function. A round of coding was then completed in order to construct a preliminary list of relevant claims and website features. A protocol design (see: Altheide 1996) was then employed for the second round of coding, when initial coding categories were refined and collapsed into three primary categories: claim distribution, advocacy networking, and mobilization tactics. A final review of each document helped ensure the accuracy of identified claims-making, networking, and mobilization components found on NRA associated web pages.

## The NRA and Gun Advocacy

To better understand how the Internet intersects with the social problems process, consider the renewed calls from anti-gun activists for stronger

federal and state regulations on the public availability of firearms and ammunition following high-profile school and mass shootings. In those moments when public attention is redirected towards the graphic details of seemingly senseless crimes and the fact that gun crime is disproportionately high in the U.S. compared to other westernized nations, activists who both support and oppose gun control are mobilized into action. After the Sandy Hook school shooting in 2012, for example, rallies, demonstrations, and other protest efforts were organized around the country by gun control advocates who suddenly had an audience of concerned citizens whose attention was again focused on the issue of gun violence thanks to widespread media coverage of the latest shocking crime. They also mobilized in cyberspace: anti-gun activist organizations such as the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence used their websites to publicize claims about the social harms caused by firearms, offer prospective supporters opportunities to participate in various online protest campaigns, and fundraise via donations and merchandising.

Of course, the tale of gun violence is not only being told by claims-makers seeking to restrict access to firearms. In response to Sandy Hook and other high-profile mass shootings, the National Rifle Association (NRA) quickly mobilized in an effort to stunt the burgeoning momentum of gun control advocates by publically campaigning and lobbying politicians in defense of “the Second Amendment rights of all law-abiding Americans” (The NRA Foundation 2014). Established in 1871, the NRA is a nonprofit organization that promotes responsi-

ble gun ownership, as well as firearm education and safety training. With membership exceeding 4.5 million people (U.S. Senate 2013), the NRA flexes considerable political and economic muscle through highly funded advertising campaigns and lobbying of policymakers, which allows them to broker deals and manipulate outcomes without first having to pique social interest by attracting media attention to their claims.

Even the most prominent gun control activist groups have significantly fewer resources and smaller bases of support than the NRA; the Brady Campaign, for example, had just over 600,000 members in 2010 (Spitzer 2012). That same year, the NRA and its affiliates spent approximately \$278 million on lobbying, campaigning, and other firearm-related expenditures; in contrast, three leading anti-gun organizations had budgets totaling less than \$6 million (Cillizza 2012). These disparities help the NRA to influence legislative outcomes even when there may appear to be little opportunity to do so, in part, because its large and stable membership donations fund claims-making operations and the group’s extensive infrastructure.

Much of the group’s influence stems from a relentless lobbying effort, in Washington and throughout the country, driven by a staff of 80 and a huge and well-organized grassroots base. In 2012, it spent nearly \$81 million on member communication and mailings ... at the same time, gun control advocacy groups have struggled to match the NRA in finances in influence. The Brady Campaign spends a little more than \$3 million per year. (Gold, Tanfani, and Mascaro 2012)

The NRA’s economic power is in many ways part and parcel of its political clout. Public officials who fear electoral wrath may acquiesce on the issue of gun rights, particularly given that they cannot rely on similar economic support or voter mobilization from the anti-gun lobby. Success for the NRA therefore hinges on compelling supporters and other contributors to donate money to fund claims-making operations and maintain the group’s teams of lobbyists, lawyers, and public relation specialists, who often do their work out of the public spotlight, but nonetheless draw their legitimacy with policymakers from the more than four million members who provide the NRA with tremendous political sway.

### Claims-Making on Gun Rights in Cyberspace

Traditionally, activist groups like the NRA have coaxed supporters into championing their cause using techniques like cold-calling, pamphlet distribution, and holding public rallies. These tactics, however, can be rather time-consuming and expensive to organize; many claimants lack the necessary infrastructure and available assets needed to coordinate them and consistently make their claims available to prospective supporters. Online technology, by contrast, allows claims-makers to facilitate perpetual resource acquisition by providing a powerful networking structure that enables claim distribution, membership drives, fundraising, merchandising, and new forms of cyber-protest action at all hours of the day and for relatively little cost. Simply put, the networking and mobilization capabilities made possible by the Internet

may help sustain (and advance) the claims-making campaigns advanced by both fledgling activist organizations that struggle to remain solvent and more established claimants like the NRA.

When put into practice, the Internet does *not* function for claimants as a mechanism for traditional grassroots activism nor are websites necessarily designed to draw media attention to activists and their claims. Instead, online technology provides a publically available web presence with global reach that allows claims-makers to advertise themselves and disseminate claims via a variety of media formats, create advocacy networks both in cyberspace (by hyperlinking with other likeminded web spaces) and with prospective supporters in the real world, and by developing new and unique mobilization tactics in cyber settings.

### Dissemination of Claims

The primary and most visibly striking aspect of NRA websites is the abundance of available information related to the group and its firearms-related agenda: This not only includes efforts to frame the NRA as a “civil rights organization” (NRA 2014), but also prominently advertise the numerous benefits of being an NRA member, along with a plethora of claims that espouse the advantages of responsible gun ownership and disparage the policies and practices of political opponents seeking to restrict gun rights. For example, the NRA grades political candidates’ voting records on gun issues from A to F and publishes those scores on its Political Victory Fund website (NRA Political Victory Fund 2014); these evaluations are then used to

endorse public officials who consistently support NRA-backed mandates and “penalize lawmakers who vote for what it deems ‘anti-gun’ measures by giving them poor grades in their rating system” (Hunt 2013). In doing so, the NRA uses its web presence to direct audiences towards preferred politicians whose campaigns they then subsidize with substantial monetary donations. To this point, in 2012, the NRA spent nearly \$700,000 on direct contributions to political candidates, with greater than 80% of NRA-backed candidates winning their House or Senate races. Furthermore, approximately 60% of congressional members have received more than \$4.3 million in total NRA contributions since 1990; the top recipients of those funds have the highest overall grades and the longest average tenure in Congress (Cillizza 2012; 2013).

The correlation between NRA approval ratings and the number of years that politicians serve in office is likely related more to the money funneled to those candidates than the availability of online endorsements posted on NRA websites. Nonetheless, claims-making practices in cyberspace have real world implications to the extent they help mobilize a voting constituency in support of the NRA’s social agenda. This may partly explain why NRA websites employ dynamic multimedia presentations that bombard viewers with claims about the group, its goals, and the urgent need for supporters to take action against those who seek to restrict gun availability because they “don’t agree with the freedoms that [NRA members] cherish” (Mungin 2013). Often these claims are replete with emotionally gripping tales about how real life gun owners performed heroic actions or saved them-

selves from being victimized, the unconstitutional efforts made by public officials seeking to restrict firearms, and the important role played by individual members in the larger success of the NRA.

This latter point is particularly important because presenting claims that are likely to resonate as relevant to prospective supporters’ life experiences may cultivate a veneer of personal connectedness, thereby allowing the NRA to establish “social ties,” which are then continually reinforced as meaningful through heartfelt claims that pressure members and casual observers alike to get more actively involved in the NRA (see: McAdam 2003). While the actual content of claims and the emotional appeals contained therein are not entirely dissimilar to what is found in a more traditional print newsletter or pamphlet, the multimedia presentation found on NRA websites is far more dynamic, can be updated with fresh content far more efficiently, and is published in real time to a much larger audience than print media. To this end, the NRA litters its sites with emotional symbolism, such as images of American flags, snow capped mountains, bald eagles, and the faces of everyday people who, as NRA supporters, are “proud defenders of history’s patriots and diligent protectors of the Second Amendment” (NRA 2014). The NRA also attempts to personalize claims towards specific demographic audiences, such as the NRA Women website, which chronicles the benefits of gun ownership, usage, and safety from a more feminine perspective. Additionally, NRA websites also display celebrities like actors Chuck Norris and R. Lee Ermey advocating for gun rights.

The purpose of celebrity endorsements is similar to the backing of experts: They have the ability to validate claims among audiences. While famous people may lack the proficiency of an expert, their public visibility provides a measure of credibility among people who recognize them and admire their status. Hence, celebrities help claimants legitimize their causes while simultaneously increasing the possibility that issues will stand out as important among potential supporters (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Meyer and Gamson 1995; Street 2002; Brubaker 2008). When taken collectively, these claims-making tactics and goals are not fundamentally different from traditional offline techniques: the recruitment and preservation of membership, connecting the group’s political agenda to the salient identities of supporters, and actively discrediting the positions of political opponents whose words and actions may weaken the bond between the NRA and its adherents (see: McAdam and Paulsen 1993). The difference, however, is the dynamic multimedia presentation, the constant availability of unfiltered claims, and the ability to connect claims-making with networking and mobilization functions in online settings.

### Cyber-Networking and Online Advocacy Networks

Just as the claims presented on NRA websites are designed to connect with prospective allies, social networks are essential to the process by which people identify the shared norms and values that influence their decisions to participate in collective action (Passy 2003). Cyberspace provides claimants with an additional setting in which to establish,

cultivate, and reinforce supporters’ identification and commitment to their cause, along with the opportunities to do so on a sustained basis and with minimal effort as compared to more traditional forms of communication. In particular, online networking structures have two important functions for the NRA. First, facilitating communication with and among supporters in disparate geographic locations; and, second, expanding the organization’s carrying capacity via hyperlinking to social media (YouTube, Facebook), satellite (NRA affiliated), and external (pro-gun but not NRA affiliated) websites. Each of these tasks reflects a movement towards *organizational hybridity*, which simply means that claims-makers are incorporating a combination of online and real world operations into their organizational models (Chadwick 2006), thereby fashioning a cyber-presence dedicated to the social agenda and ideological discourse shared by claimants and their supporters (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

Victor Perez (2013:76) notes that hyperlinked websites cultivate working partnerships even when those “sites do not explicitly endorse each other or necessarily accept the information contained on [those] sites.” In other words, networking structures expand the scope and reach of their claims beyond the boundaries of their own web spaces, while also serving to funnel audiences to other areas of the Internet that are congenial to the NRA and the larger issue of gun rights. Hyperlinking, therefore, allows claimants to prompt individuals on where to proceed for additional information in order to encapsulate them in a self-contained bubble that only directs them to sympathetic content and claims. Of course, no single entity can entirely

control where and how people search the Internet for information. Rather, the idea is to create a funneling mechanism that allows the NRA to maintain an element of control over where viewers of their websites proceed for additional information and sway them into digesting as many pro-gun claims as possible.

Online networking, however, does not simply enhance the NRA's ability to circulate claims, it also facilitates communication with and among backers from remote locations across the globe. Whether via interactive elements found on NRA websites or the use of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, users can post messages, share experiences, and, more generally, interact with others at their choosing. For instance, the NRA provides a "Near You" service that connects people to NRA sponsored events in their region, including safety seminars, training classes, and "friends of the NRA" events, which purports to offer fellowship with gun enthusiasts in local communities (see: Friends of NRA 2014). Additionally, users are prompted to "get involved locally" on the NRA-ILA activism website (see: <https://www.nraila.org/take-action/volunteer/>), and provided with information on how to coordinate with other "dedicated volunteers who work vigorously at the local, state, and federal levels to defend our Second Amendment rights."

Regardless of whether NRA members take advantage of these opportunities made available online to participate in real world grassroots activism, their presence, and the extent to which the NRA makes a visible effort to *connect the web with the street* (see:

Clark and Themudo 2006), reflects the fundamental importance of social networks to the process by which people identify their shared values and decide whether to engage in collective action (Passy 2003). Cyber-networking, therefore, can provide claimants and their supporters with a vehicle to establish, cultivate, and reinforce their allegiance to a chosen cause. Thus, to the extent that successful claims-making campaigns convince supporters to "become personally involved in collective action," the networking capacity of the Internet might be an important tool for providing the "opportunities to do so on a sustained basis" (Diani 2003:7).

### Mobilizing Resources in Cyberspace

Getting advocates into the fold is only half of the battle for any set of claims-makers. Once people identify themselves with groups such as the NRA, they must be kept engaged through continued ideological reinforcement. In cyberspace, the NRA focuses on four core elements of participant mobilization: fundraising, voter registration, grassroots involvement, and online activism. The first component deals with financial (membership fees, gifts, merchandising, and so forth) resource acquisition. The remaining three are intended to rally people towards actions that help the NRA accomplish its political goals (see: McCarthy and Zald 1977), and reflect how the NRA attempts to integrate e-mobilization "for political recruitment, organization, and campaigning" (Chadwick 2006:144).

Although conventional, real world tactics remain integral to claimants' efforts, these emergent forms of e-mobilization (see: Chadwick 2006) are not nec-

essarily designed to cultivate dramatic street-level responses that pique public interest and attract media attention. Instead, the Internet primarily appears to foster *armchair* activism, wherein supporters engage in more passive forms of protest action from the comforts of home. For example, the NRA provides online petitions and e-mail campaigns that urge people to send prewritten statements about protecting gun rights to congressional representatives and media organizations. Similarly, the NRA's "Trigger the Vote" movement encourages supporters to send electronic messages in hopes of ensuring "gun owners across the country are registered to vote" so their voices will be heard during election season (NRA Trigger the Vote 2014).

It is important to note these forms of cyber-activism are not fundamentally new to the social problems process. McCarthy and Zald (1977), for example, wrote about social movement organizations employing cadres, identifying donor networks, and promoting passive forms of activism, such as letter writing campaigns, long before the Internet. The difference, however, is the ease with which mobilized action can be completed in cyberspace, and the sheer scope of potential supporters who can be targeted at any given time using the Internet. While grassroots protest is time and place specific, online activism allows people to simultaneously fight for gun rights in Connecticut, school safety in Florida, and tax reform in Washington D.C., all without leaving their home. Consequently, it is possible to participate in hundreds, if not thousands, of cyber-events in the amount of time it would take to attend a single NRA rally. E-mobilization, then, may facilitate a greater consistency

of participation among a broader number of supporters whose efforts require minimal labor to successfully complete, yet are presented as essential to advancing the NRA's core mission. Furthermore, encouraging citizens to take part in even the most docile types of e-mobilization may encourage more regular NRA engagement by creating a sense of active involvement with the organization. In other words, the reduced intensity of cyber-activism may actually yield a greater consistency of participation among NRA supporters.

### Assessing the Internet Effect

We may reasonably assume the sheer ease with which people can engage with claims-makers in online environments may compel a larger number of prospective supporters to participate in e-mobilization than might have the time, energy, or interest to involve themselves in real world actions such as marches or rallies. The problem for many claims-makers, however, is that armchair activism may cultivate only superficial commitments from participants willing to take part in mobilized action that requires little or no effort. Large and established pressure groups like the NRA that primarily seek to mobilize resources in cyber-space can benefit by drawing upon their large support bases and name recognition when attempting to coax supporters to the claims and activism opportunities available on their websites. Less established claimants, however, may find it much more difficult to realize the true benefits of e-mobilization and armchair activism. Potential contributors may remain unaware of more obscure claims-makers because online technology requires people to actively search for

information and is therefore not as effective as mainstream news coverage of a protest event in spreading the message to the uninitiated. Simply put, the Internet is an important tactical resource because it directly links claimants to the general public, but it may not offer sufficient exposure without corresponding media attention to benefit fledgling activists in a manner similar to established pressure groups with vast resources and stable membership.

There are, of course, examples of people and groups with little political power using the Internet to successfully disseminate claims and mobilize people. For example, in 2012, 13-year-old McKenna Pope started a petition on the Change.org website to urge toy maker Hasbro to manufacture its Easy-Bake Oven in gender-neutral colors that would also appeal to boys. More than 44,000 signatures later, Pope and her family delivered the signatures to Hasbro's corporate headquarters; the company responded by introducing new colors like black and silver to the product line (Grinberg 2012). It undoubtedly speaks to the power of the Internet when a young girl can start a petition that garners so much public attention it compels a corporate reaction. Yet we may wonder whether Pope would have been successful had Hasbro not been presented with a good public relations opportunity and the press not picked up on the compelling human-interest story of a girl taking on a large corporation and made the public aware of her fight, which surely led many more people to take a few seconds and add their names to the petition.

Her achievements notwithstanding, there is an undeniable difference between McKenna Pope,

whose feel-good story masks the fact that millions of online petitions go virtually unnoticed every day, and the NRA, which has a ready-made base of 4 million members ready to visit its website, donate money, and remind legislators of the NRA's political power regardless of whether mainline news workers direct public attention to those efforts. Considering activists' goal to distribute claims to the largest possible audience in hopes of raising public attention to their issues, the sheer glut of information available online might actually make fledgling claimants more obscure and less likely to receive media coverage by comparison to pressure groups like the NRA. The Internet could therefore have a watering down effect by providing the press and larger public with a trove of readily available claims, most of which will never receive any widespread recognition. As a result, the Internet may actually exacerbate power differentials, leaving more established claims-makers that are less reliant on media coverage better positioned to succeed in an online world.

Drawing on this point, e-mobilization appears to facilitate more passive forms of activism that lack the dramatic value of grassroots protest and more visible forms of public street-level activism. Online claims-making and advocacy might therefore prove less effective at luring new supporters to the cause, limiting their long-term value to outsider claimants who are constantly struggling to obtain a sufficiently stable membership base. This is not to suggest that outsiders do not benefit from e-mobilization. To the contrary, simply being online increases the public visibility of even the most obscure claimants because the Internet is a global

mass medium by which information can be shared and supporters can contribute the symbolic and material resources needed to sustain claims-making campaigns. The problem, however, is that simply having an online presence does not guarantee that anyone will pay attention to activists if they are unable to direct widespread public attention to their claims, a task traditionally accomplished through mainstream media coverage. This places outsiders at a distinct disadvantage in cyberspace as compared to powerful lobbying and pressure groups, like the NRA, which can maximize the benefits of online claims-making and e-mobilization knowing they already receive sufficient public and media exposure, acquire needed assets from their large membership bases, and facilitate back-room deals with policymakers.

## Conclusion

The growing presence of online claims-making and cyber-activism offers a fertile area of study, in part, because they beget a fundamental paradox in social problem construction: While the Internet allows claims to spread without coverage from traditional media, Internet exposure does not guarantee they will be recognized without the general public first being informed by journalists about the relevance of specific claims to their lives. Consider the tragic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico that devastated wetlands across the coast of Louisiana and the Gulf Coast during the spring and summer of 2010. In the immediate aftermath, Tony Heyward, the CEO of British Petroleum (BP, the company whose rig exploded thereby producing the spill), held a press conference during which he mitigated

both the effects of the disaster and his own company's liability, as well as offered solutions for "capping" the leaking well. In these highly publicized moments, Heyward had a Big Media platform to spread claims promoting the view that his company had limited culpability in the disaster.

Heyward's framing of the Gulf oil spill instantly spread across the Internet and was available at all times and from almost anywhere. Although environmentalists, citizen journalists, and others critics of BP had also mobilized and were posting counter-claims online (which, in rare cases, also received scattered news coverage), they were advocating from a disadvantaged position because collectively they have less power to influence news cycles and the legislative process than a corporate behemoth like BP.

As BP continues to try to stop the oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico, the energy giant is also dealing with a public relations nightmare. That's why the company is snapping up search phrases like "oil spill" and "oil spill claims" on Google and Yahoo. The strategy, says a company spokeswoman, aims to "assist those who are most impacted and help them find the right forms and the right people quickly and effectively." (Friedman 2010)

BP effectively used its considerable economic might to ensure "its own website would rank higher or even top in the list of advertisements that appear alongside search results when Internet users search on terms such as 'oil spill,' 'volunteer,' and 'claims'" (Reuters 2010). At the very least, this indicates that claimants with sufficient

resources, or those who are web-savvy, can manipulate cyber-arenas to their benefit. Although further research is needed to determine whether the comparably powerless are able to implement parallel methods to compete in online environments, cyber-arenas, such as search engines and mainstream news websites, appear to most effectively function as funneling mechanisms that direct users to other areas of the Internet that are congenial to positions, claims, and issues espoused by insiders, such as the NRA.

There is little disputing that bloggers, citizen journalists, and other outsider claimants have used the Internet to obtain social recognition by appearing in search engine results, breaking news stories, and out-scooping mainstream journalists. Yet their influence is diluted considerably to the extent that insiders can establish themselves as the primary framers of media narratives by having the ability to ensure their claims are most visible in cyberspace. Furthermore, using cyber-arenas to disseminate claims appears to have added legitimacy when performed in conjunction with insider status. Whereas social movements derive their power from media coverage, insiders have perpetual entrée to policymakers. Online claims-making, then, is not needed to bring attention to the NRA, but rather mobilize needed material (e.g., money) and nonmaterial (e.g., members participating in online activism) resources from its stable advocacy base. Furthermore, there is an inherent *credibility gap* that must be considered when evaluating the long-term viability of citizen journalism and other forms of outsider claims-making in cyberspace. News consumption has been trending away from

traditional television broadcasts and print media and towards digital sources via computers and mobile phones; this does not necessarily correlate to audiences accessing sites for alternative citizen journalism with greater frequency, and the social issues being discussed at any given time on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are usually driven by mainstream media coverage.

Research conducted by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism has found "that the reputation or brand of a news organization, a very traditional idea, is the most important factor in determining where consumers go for news, and that is even truer on mobile devices than on laptops or desktops" (Mitchell, Rosentiel, and Christian 2012). These figures may someday change, but the fact that most people tend to frequent larger, trusted news websites may also reflect the credibility gap associated with outsider claims-making: There is a host of concerns about whether standards of journalistic integrity can be upheld for amateur claimants, and whether there can be accountability for misleading or falsified reporting when audiences cannot definitively identify the source of the information being presented to them. So long as outsiders are wholly contingent on competing for mainstream media attention in order for their claims to receive public attention, and news coverage continues to be framed primarily according to the claims made by political and corporate insiders, then the power disparities inherent to the social problems process are likely to remain unchanged regardless of whether cyber-arenas allow a broader spectrum of citizens to participate in mass media. This is ultimately the

crucial weakness of cyber-arenas in their present form for outsider claims-makers: Social change often requires a sustained public response that mobilizes political forces into action. While the NRA is undoubtedly expanding its scope and global reach

in cyberspace, it is still unclear whether outsider claimants can use the Internet to consistently generate sufficient public interest needed to compel policymakers to take action and have a meaningful long-term effect on the social problems process.

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