

Stories For Change: is online campaigning the new politics or just noise?

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On Thursday Katherine Sladden, a campaigner at Change.org, presented “Stories that make change” to the Polis LSE Summer School. Here’s Ngozi Chuku’s report on the talk and her reflections on online campaigning.

We live in a changing world. A cliché so overused that perhaps it now holds little meaning?

Some would claim there is ‘nothing new under the sun’ while others argue our interconnected world has numerous opportunities for substantial social advancements.

Katherine Sladden works to help those individuals reach their goals. Her background in advocacy work, and her passion for empowering others attracted her to the for-profit organization, she said.

According to the Change.org web site, the company is the world’s largest online petition platform with more than 40 million users in more than 196 countries.

Change.org enables any individual with access to the Internet the chance to organize petitions and garner online signatures for social campaigns, regardless of an issue’s location or relative impact.

Sladden says once a petition is approved by the organization, anyone is able to sign-on and support the cause.

Petition organizers use other social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to spread the word and gain signatures for their causes.

Nic Hughes Campaign

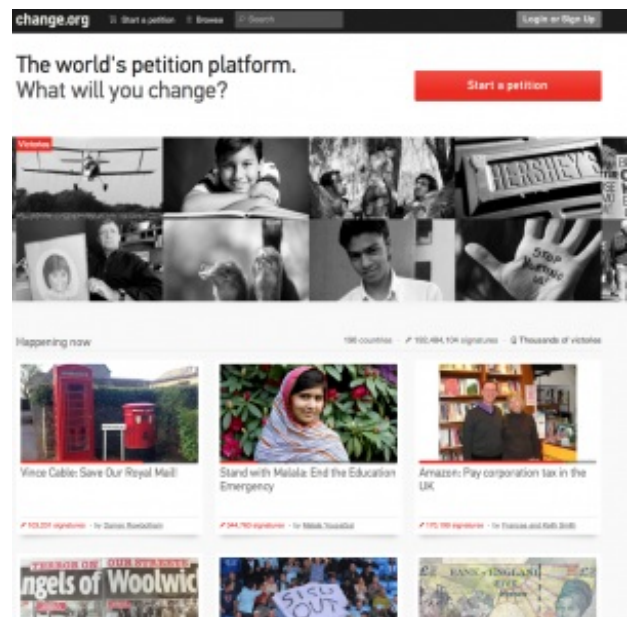
Take the story of 44-year-old Nic Hughes who died of cancer last October.

Sladden said the life insurance company that covered Hughes prior to his diagnosis and subsequent death, was refusing to pay his family their policy claim.

The insurer, Friends Life, disputed owing Hughes’ widow more than £100,000 because he failed to disclose tingling and numbness from his pre-existing ulcerative colitis on a 2009 insurance application, according to [The Observer](http://TheObserver)

Hughes’ family and friends were determined to obtain the financial support they believed they were owed.

As a result, Sladden said the family posted a petition on the Change.org web site and also spread the story on Twitter, a popular social networking site with more than 200 million active users.



In an [follow-up](#), *The Observer* reported Friends Life had agreed to pay the large sum to the Hughes family.

“*The Observer* story was picked up by the Daily Mail and the family’s campaign was supported via Twitter by celebrities, including Stephen Fry and Miranda Hart,” according to the article.

It should be noted, however *The Observer* did not make any mention of Change.org’s involvement in the Hughes campaign in the April piece.

Sladden said Change.org played worked closely with Hughes’ family to garner the media attention that ultimately catalysed the company’s reversal of refusing to pay the six-figure claim.

Banknote Women Campaign

Another campaign is calling for the Bank of England to reverse its decision to not include any women on new bank notes. The cause’s online petition has around 30 thousand signatures, Sladden said.

The petition’s organizer, student Caroline Criado-Perez, 29, recently protested in front of the Bank of England with more than 30 other women.

A few days later, the Bank’s new governor, Mark Carney, admitted the institution’s oversight on the issue and agreed to re-consider the decision.

While the majority of petitioners’ goals are to bring about tangible social change, Sladden says that is not the only reason to raise awareness about social issues:

“It’s not always about winning the issue but being heard.”

Sladden says she is excited about future opportunities for the organization to widen its reach by entering emerging markets where the organization currently has little online presence.

Some thoughts on Change.org:

The Change.org company offers an interesting proposition; the chance to make one’s voice heard with ease, speed, and at minimal costs. Arguably the most important advantage it offers to users is a global reach. A Change.org petitioner in Jacksonville, Florida can potentially reach an individual in Lasbela, Pakistan within seconds.

In our digitally modern society nearly everyone has the opportunity to join an online cause and participate in ‘ideal’ social change movements. Movement leaders can use Change.org to help garner the public support needed to help make their causes more viable, thereby increasing the likelihood journalists and policymakers will acknowledge their campaigns.

With the advent of the Internet individuals have more choice than ever to decide what messages they give their attention to. The introduction of networked journalism, a synthesis of traditional news journalism and emerging forms of participatory media enabled by web technologies^[1], adds unprecedented diversity to the types of media we choose to consume.

It might be that these online campaigns actually distract the public and the media from traditional social issues with their personal, individual stories. And perhaps in Western societies petitions, demonstrations, protests, etc. may be so common that journalists do not pay them much attention unless something about them really stands out like , for instance #Occupy.



Change.org web site creates the possibility for several individuals to create petitions for the same cause and within the same communities. This phenomenon would only add to the noise and clutter web surfers experience on a daily basis.

In this instance, how does one choose which specific cause to support? None of them? All of them? In doing so, are these related causes marginalized and less noteworthy, thereby less likely to gain media coverage?

On the flip side, do the related causes create a synergy enabling them to work together for the greater good? Is global reach more effective? Is access power^[2] increased forcing journalists to take note that such a cause is indeed a 'big deal' and they had better cover it?

Finally, while it is reasonable that Change.org is a for-profit company, it is the source of those revenues that could one-day become social concerns in their own right. The organization makes its profits from advertisements. The site is providing personalized ads to users which means that ads appear without the user's consent or desire? If so, this raises the question of whether privacy issues are in play?



The image shows a screenshot of the 'Start a petition' form on Change.org. The form is titled 'Start a petition' and has a subtitle 'or grassroots campaign for change begins here'. It contains three main sections: 1. 'Whom do you want to petition?' with a text input field and a placeholder 'Enter the name of an individual, organization or government body'. 2. 'What do you want them to do?' with a text input field and a placeholder 'e.g. Stop the delivery of unmarked drones to schools'. 3. 'Why is this important?' with a text input field and a placeholder 'Explain why someone should support this petition'. At the bottom, there is a checkbox 'I am starting this petition on behalf of an organization' and a red 'Start my petition' button.

Katherine Sladden's enthusiasm is contagious and inspired me to want to participate in a social policy issue that is important to me. By doing so, I hope I will also experience personal growth. I will change.

This article by Polis Summer School student Ngozi Chuku @HealthisWealthNAC

[1] Connecting to the world: Beckett and Fenyo (2012)

[2] Access power-the way in which mass media controls the range of voices or interests able to use the various media formats: Street, J. Mass Media, Politics and Democracy. (2001)

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