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How the Internet Invented Howard Dean

Forget fundraising (though his opponents sure can't). The real reason the Doctor is in: He listens to the technology - and the people who use it.

By Gary Wolf

It is 83 days before the Iowa caucuses, and I'm sitting at a small table on a private jet above Colorado getting a pure dose of Internet religion from Howard Dean. "The Internet community is wondering what its place in the world of politics is," Dean says. "Along comes this campaign to take back the country for ordinary human beings, and the best way you can do that is through the Net. We listen. We pay attention. If I give a speech and the blog people don't like it, next time I change the speech."

The biggest news of the political season has been the tale of this small-state governor who, with the help of Meetup.com and hundreds of bloggers, has elbowed his way into serious contention for his party's presidential nomination. As every alert citizen knows, Dean has used the Net to raise more money than any other Democratic candidate. He's also used it to organize thousands of volunteers who go door-to-door, write personal letters to likely voters, host meetings, and distribute flyers.

Naturally, bloggers everywhere are thrilled. Even those who hate the candidate love the way the campaign is being managed. "I'd vote for SpongeBob SquarePants over Howard Dean," writes Derek James in his political blog, Thinking as a Hobby. But Dean's organization, James admits, is being run "in a very smart, very democratic way." Bloggers are fascinated by Dean for philosophical and also parochial reasons. They feel they have a right to be proud. Dean has become the front-runner by applying their most cherished rules for attracting attention and building a social network on the Internet.

"We fell into this by accident," Dean admits. "I wish I could tell you we were smart enough to figure this out. But the community taught us. They seized the initiative through Meetup. They built our organization for us before we had an organization."

Meetup is a Web tool for forming social groups. In early 2003, Dean himself was lured to an early New York City meetup where he found more than 300 enthusiastic supporters waiting to greet him. Meetup quickly became the

engine of Dean's Internet campaign. Back then, the leading group on the site was a club for witches. Zephyr Teachout, Dean's director of Internet outreach, describes sitting across from campaign manager Joe Trippi in the early weeks and hitting Refresh again and again on her Web browser. "I was obsessed with beating Witches," she says. "Witches had 15,000 members, and we had 3,000. I wanted first place."

Three thousand is a small number. But all campaigns depend on a feedback loop, and 3,000 passionate supporters who are connected via the Internet are influential in a way that an equivalent crowd would never be if you had to gather it via direct mail or a telephone survey. Dean's Meetup members quickly recruited others, and by late March Dean had beaten Witches. Growth followed an exponential curve; Dean's new supporters contributed money, his piles of money won respect from the media, and media attention pushed Meetup numbers higher. Most of the Democratic candidates who polled in the low single digits a year ago still poll in the low single digits. They never gained momentum. Dean's early use of Meetup lowered the feedback threshold, just as a good supply of kindling makes it easier to light a fire. In the third quarter of 2003, Dean raised nearly \$15 million - most of it in small donations - setting a one-quarter record for a Democratic candidate in a presidential race.

By mid-November, the Howard Dean group on Meetup would have more than 140,000 members, though Meetup would matter less. After demonstrating his fundraising prowess, Dean bagged endorsements from two of the country's most powerful labor groups, the Service Employees International Union and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees.

But for today, the Internet remains the key engine of Dean's election bid and he has yet to merge his grassroots movement with the traditional Democratic power structure. I'm here to learn more about what makes his Net campaign work.

I like Dean's pugnacity, his antiwar stance, and the way he is challenging the timorous leaders of his party. A couple of months ago, before I took this assignment for *Wired*, I sent him a hundred bucks over the Web. But the Contribute button on Dean's Web page hardly accounts for his dominance. One key to his online popularity is the harmony between his message and the self-image of the Internet community. "A lot of the people on the Net have given up on traditional politics precisely because it was about television and the ballot box, and they had no way to shout back," he says. "What we've given people is a way to shout back, and we listen - they don't even have to shout anymore."

Dean has been reluctant to take a position on core Net issues like copyright law and peer-to-peer file-sharing. But that didn't matter. The power of Dean's campaign does not come from his appeal to Net users as an interest group but from a fateful concurrence of other forces: a strong antiwar message; a vivid, individualist candidate; a lucky head start with Meetup; an Internet-savvy campaign manager in Joe Trippi; and, most important, a willingness to let a decentralized network of supporters play a tactical role. With these assets, Dean gained a potent lead. The very structure of the networks his campaign has built - a structure that enhances the power of feedback - creates obstacles even for a rival flexible enough to challenge Dean on his own ground.

The intersection of political analysis and Internet theory is a busy crossroad of cliché, where familiar rhetorical vehicles - *decentralized authority*, *emergent leadership*, *empowered grass roots* - create a ceaseless buzz. But the Dean organization has embraced this language of Web politics passionately. Below, I've used five popular Internet axioms to give a snapshot of his campaign during the heady days when it first pulled into the lead.

Make the network stupid.

The Dean campaign is a network rather than an army, and that is one of its strengths. But it's a stupid network, and that's also a strength. Stupid is meant in the technical sense, defined by David Isenberg in his classic telephony paper, "The Rise of the Stupid Network." Isenberg advanced the principle that under conditions of uncertainty, a network should not be optimized for any set of uses presumed to be definitive. Instead, the network should be as simple as possible, with advanced functionality and intelligence moved out to its edges. For the Dean campaign, this means that hundreds of independent groups are organizing with very little direction from headquarters.

In February 2003, there were 11 Dean meetings around the country organized through Meetup.com. By late fall, there were more than 800 monthly meetings on the calendar. At first, meetups were loosely tracked through intermittent emails to a list of known organizers. But as long as responsibility for tracking organizers fell to Dean's paid staff in Burlington, Vermont, there was a problem. "We were inadvertently allowing bottlenecks in

the network through some power-hungry coordinators who thought they were the only ones who could have contact with the campaign," says Michael Silberman, Dean's national Meetup coordinator. "We added or removed coordinators only through email or phone, and there's a limit to our human ability to manage the growth of such a large network."

In October, the campaign switched to an automated, Web-based system that keeps the selection and management of meetup coordinators out of the hands of the campaign. Supporters can nominate themselves to coordinate a meetup. Responsibility for success of the meetup rests with the individual organizers. Many regions have more than one meetup, so there is the possibility of competition and splitting, but this tension brings advantages. The Dean network relies on the good sense of the users to select a meetup that is working well. Organizers have a monthly conference call with Trippi and receive sample agendas and organizing materials. Ultimately, what happens is up to them.

"In the old telephone company, central planning was needed before the network could grow," says Isenberg, when I call to talk to him about the campaign. "If you are willing to let things happen from the bottom up, you can scale without doing all that planning."

Let the ants do the work.

In the past, early enthusiasm in western states was meaningless to a primary candidate except as a source of donations. The first contests were on the other side of the country, where face-to-face politics and idiosyncratic issues (such as the value of ethanol as a gasoline additive) played an absurdly outsize role. No campaign dedicated to winning Iowa could waste time building an organization elsewhere. But today, Dean supporters build their own nodes.

"We consider it our job to deliver Marin County for Dean," says Katy Butler, a volunteer I talk with at a Seniors for Dean meeting in San Francisco. Under normal circumstances, this would be a worthless contribution. Small, rich, liberal Marin County could hardly matter less. But because the entire Dean system is densely linked, the distant work of all the local groups feeds back into the campaign. Local letters to the editor are copied and sent around by email, graphics and videos are shared among groups, and technical assistance is distributed. A local and national volunteer infrastructure arises with almost no help or supervision.

"It's the swarm that drives the story, not the queen ant," says Steven Johnson, author of *Emergence*. For months, local meetups, including the regular Dean meetups in Marin, have been composing handwritten letters to Iowa Democrats, asking them to support Dean.

This past summer, polls showed Dean behind Dick Gephardt in Iowa. After 30,000 handwritten letters went out from the July 2 meetups, Dean surged, and by August the polls had him tied with Gephardt or pulling into the lead. In New Hampshire in midsummer, Dean was behind Kerry. At the August 6 meetups, tens of thousands of letters were mailed to New Hampshire. By the end of the month, Dean was in first place with a double-digit lead he has maintained ever since. By taking a set of widely dispersed supporters and converting them into a swarm of personal advocates, Dean's campaign almost instantly changed the dynamics of the race in the earliest states.

Leaders are places.

The first political swarm of Democratic politics was not the Dean campaign but MoveOn.org, whose 2 million members donate money to run advertisements against the Bush administration and engage in massive telephone and petition campaigns. Last summer, MoveOn held an online vote to determine which Democratic candidate, if any, the organization would support. About 317,000 votes were cast. Because no candidate won more than 50 percent of the vote, MoveOn did not make an endorsement. But Dean was the big winner, taking about 44 percent, nearly twice as much as the runner-up, Dennis Kucinich.

The high number for Kucinich, who barely registered in national polls, confirmed what any observer of MoveOn already knew - its supporters were well to the left of the party's mainstream. Nonetheless, Dean - who is pro-gun, pro-death penalty, far more economically conservative than Kucinich, and argues for keeping US troops in Iraq - beat him by 2 to 1. Was this because Dean was believed to be more electable? Unlikely. The Democratic Leadership Council, a centrist group, was loudly proclaiming that Dean's nomination would lead to a debacle.

Neither policy nor pragmatism alone drove MoveOn to Dean; his key advantage was that his bloggers were already deeply interlinked with bloggers friendly to MoveOn. Dean's network made it easy for his supporters to vote in the MoveOn poll, while offering MoveOn members an opportunity to influence the Democratic race, even if their own state's primary was irrelevant. Participation, not policy, was key.

Joi Ito, founder of Neoteny, a venture firm, and former chair of Infoseek Japan, has joined a group of technologists advising Dean (others include Ross Mayfield, Clay Shirky, and Lawrence Lessig, also a regular contributor to *Wired*). After looking at a paper Ito and some of his colleagues have been working on called "Emergent Democracy," I contact him to ask if he thinks there's a difference between an emergent leader and an old-fashioned political opportunist. What does it take to lead a smart mob? Ito emails back an odd metaphor: "You're not a leader, you're a place. You're like a park or a garden. If it's comfortable and cool, people are attracted. Deanspace is not really about Dean. It's about us."

Links attract links.

Throughout the fall, the number of people signed up for Dean meetups has been more than three times as large as the number of people signed up for Clark meetups. The Wesley Clark list is almost three times as large as the Kerry list. The Kerry list is almost 30 times as large as the Gephardt list. In *Linked: The New Science of Networks*, the physicist Albert-László Barabási describes the factors that influence the size of competing nodes in a network. His research shows why Dean's Internet lead has been so hard to overcome.

Barabási gives a formal model for what everybody already knows: Popularity breeds more popularity; links are made most quickly to Web sites that have the most links. One of the major factors determining who will win in a race for links, therefore, is time. The first sites gain an early lead, and the lead tends to grow. But, of course, late arrivals sometimes take command. This is because time is not the only factor. The other factor is what Barabási calls "fitness."

Defining fitness is an abstract exercise in Barabási's work, because he is a physicist attempting to give a general description of network behavior in all its forms. In the earliest stage of the Democratic primary runup, however, fitness can be specified more concretely. Fitness at the beginning of this campaign was closely linked to a candidate's antiwar stance. Dean was first to the Web, while sharing the best fitness position with a number of candidates from the party's left wing.

The most important thing to notice about Barabási's model is that the advantage of arriving early and offering adequate or superior fitness increases exponentially over time. This means we would not expect to find lots of competing sites clustering closely around the leader. Instead, the graph has a steep curve. This is exactly what we see when we look at the relative size of the online campaigns, whether measured by links, traffic, or Meetup numbers.

Allow the ends to connect.

Local Dean groups are not obsessed with passing their messages to the candidate. They are busy talking among themselves. "The goal is not necessarily to have messages flowing up and down," says David Weinberger, a consultant for the campaign and author of *Small Pieces Loosely Joined*. "Democracy is supposed to be about people talking with each other about what matters to them."

In terms of real political power, the end-to-end architecture has complex implications. Tactically, the local Dean groups are very powerful. "Ideas from the grass roots don't have to go back up to headquarters to be adopted," says Weinberger. "The Dean campaign instead gives you the tools to instantiate your ideas without involving headquarters." But since none of the grassroots groups are officially tied to the campaign, there is no guarantee of influence over policy. Dean is free to ignore the political wishes of any of these groups, and he often does. In many conversations with Dean supporters, I find them arguing against his positions on guns, on the death penalty, on trade. But other, more important factors bind them strongly. They admire Dean personally, they despise the current administration, and they love the structure of the campaign, which brings them together, gives them an opportunity for political conversation, and offers them the pleasure of collaborative work.

On Halloween, I attend a series of Dean meetings with Zephyr Teachout and Ryan Davis, another young Dean staffer, who have just embarked on a cross-country trip in a rickety Airstream they picked up somewhere in Los

Angeles. (The Airstream, puking green fluid, will die two days later in Nevada, and the two of them will continue by rental car.) Their goal is to observe local groups and exchange ideas.

I meet them at their first stop, a café near UC Davis. The students are planning to set up a Dean table at the local farmers market, among other outreach events. The goal is not merely to win votes, but to "sign people up." They are building a database. They're recruiting volunteers. And they will be back for money. Teachout urges the students to consider coming to Iowa for the last weeks before the caucuses. In 1988, Gephardt set a record by bringing 500 volunteers to Iowa, according to Trippi, who managed Gephardt's campaign that year. The Dean campaign wants to bring 5,000.

The day turns into an endless series of encounters with Dean enthusiasts, and what interests me most is to see at meeting after meeting the speech-making function of the candidate distributed among the participants. The speakers are often diffuse and sometimes sentimental; nonetheless, these are hot political speeches, not support group-style confessions or narrowly personal tales. Accustomed as I am to the low style of television and talk radio, to the mumbling of recalled California governor Gray Davis and the swaggering of recently installed governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, I am stunned to hear such high-quality mini-rants in the living rooms and restaurants where random Dean supporters have gathered for mutual encouragement and tactical coordination. These are the Dean blogs come to life.

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam argues that the decline of civic participation is related to the general collapse of group activities. Instead of going out with friends, people are isolated in their homes. One of the readers of *Bowling Alone* was Scott Heiferman, who in response to reading the book founded Meetup.com. Out of Meetup came Deanspace. Out of Deanspace, a political movement that eerily recalls the cracker-barrel debates and the torchlight parades that characterized presidential campaigns of the distant past. Before television, politics was a type of active recreation. On the foundation of a new technology, Dean has revived an outdated form.

The Howard Dean Reading List

How a bunch of books about social networking rebooted the Democratic system.

Out Of Control by Kevin Kelly

KEY POINT: The most powerful information systems of the future will be grown, not made.

DEAN TAKEAWAY: Turn every supporter into a potential organizer. "Grow" the grass roots.

The Cluetrain Manifesto by Chris Locke, Rick Levine, Doc Searls, and David Weinberger

KEY POINT: The Net undermines respect for authority.

DEAN TAKEAWAY: Participate: Blog daily, link to indie blogs, and allow open comments; reflect the tone of the community.

Emergence by Steven Johnson

KEY POINT: Our media and political movements will be shaped by bottom-up forces, not top-down ones.

DEAN TAKEAWAY: Let the ants do the work, not the queen; allow local groups to function independently.

Small Pieces Loosely Joined by David Weinberger

KEY POINT: The loose structure of the Web encourages social experimentation and is a balm for alienation.

DEAN TAKEAWAY: Encourage face-to-face contact.

Smart Mobs by Howard Rheingold

KEY POINT: Mobile mobs linked by electronic devices could change history by intervening in politics spontaneously.

DEAN TAKEAWAY: Hold events, such as Dean Visibility Days, where the mass of supporters suddenly come together.

Linked by Albert-László Barabási

KEY POINT: Essential aspects of networks - e.g., the advantage gained by pioneers - are the product of general laws.

DEAN TAKEAWAY: Be first to adopt and invent community tools. The risk is worth the chance of grabbing an early lead.

Managing The Swarm

Joe Trippi keeps the Dean machine in sync with the networked world.

By Gary Wolf

What does a campaign manager matter? Howard Dean fans found each other through Meetup.com and raised his banner on round-the-clock blogs - and the network did the rest. But in fact, Joe Trippi's management of the Web campaign has been obsessive and brilliant. He has hired a staff of seemingly sleepless bloggers whose engaging voices on Dean's Web site set the tone for a larger network that includes independent bloggers, Meetup members, and supporters who comment regularly on the campaign site. He participates in a series of conference calls with all the Meetup organizers, he controls the timing and goals of the major fundraising pushes, and he uses his blogs' Comments feature to provide instant, focus group-style feedback. Most important, Trippi makes sure the structure and the rhetoric of the Dean campaign are aligned with the self-image of the most active segments of the Internet community. When Dean talks about a decentralized, networked, bottom-up democracy, he is aiming these words directly at an Internet constituency Trippi knows very well.

Trippi isn't a political outsider. He worked for Edward Kennedy in 1980, Walter Mondale in 1984, and Gary Hart, then Dick Gephardt in the 1988 campaign. His Washington, DC-based political consultancy, Trippi, McMahon & Squier, is well-known in party circles and handled the media for several of Dean's Vermont gubernatorial campaigns. But Trippi spent his college years as an aeronautics student at San Jose State, and he never completely left Silicon Valley behind. During the boom years, he worked as a consultant for Prodigy Linux Systems. He remains on the board of advisers of Smartpaper, a startup that owns a string of cheesy patents for an odd, pamphlet-shaped media controller, and he is the CTO of Catapult Strategies, a PR and lobbying firm that represents a number of Valley clients.

Also during the boom, Trippi was active on Raging Bull, a rowdy message board for small-time speculators, where his nickname was random1. Trippi's favorite stock of that era: Wave Systems. He says he learned a lot about the "stickiness" of an online community from the Wave enthusiasts. Wave's share price ran all the way up to \$50 before bottoming out at 75 cents after the crash. (It now floats between \$2 and \$3.) Many of the small-time Wave investors stuck with their stock all the way down.

Contributing editor Gary Wolf (gary@aether.com) wrote about Amazon's digital book archive in Wired 11.12

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