

Generation Digital

Politics, Commerce, and Childhood in the Age of the Internet

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7 Peer-to-Peer Politics

In the months leading up to election day in 2004, dozens of new Web sites began popping up on the Internet, all with the same goal. The veteran Rock the Vote was joined by a new army of online activists with strange and provocative names—PunkVoter.com, League of Pissed Off Voters, and Vote or Die!—in the biggest battle for the youth vote in U.S. history. Voter-mobilization campaigns linked up with pop culture, enlisting familiar icons from the media world in the all-out effort. Borrowing from cutting-edge digital-marketing strategies, they refashioned social-networking software and other personalized peer-to-peer communications tools into political weapons. Some took to the streets, enlisting mobile technologies to coordinate and orchestrate on-the-ground “smart mob” battles.¹

While the Internet had begun to play an increasingly prominent role in campaign politics, 2004 marked the first truly high-tech election. An explosion of political Web sites and a burst of innovation took center stage, capturing the public imagination. A new generation of bloggers did an end run around the news media, scooping stories, whipping up controversies, and forcing issues onto the political agenda. Even the voting process itself became high-tech. The debacle of hanging chads and missing votes four years earlier had spawned a new generation of digital voting devices to replace outdated mechanical machines.² The election became a crucible of heated, frenetic activity, as strategists experimented with every possible means to further their goals, inventing new software, revamping existing digital tools for new uses, and hurriedly putting them into use, sometimes before the kinks had been worked out.³ As the race tightened and election day neared, a frenzy of new efforts mobilized, combining traditional grassroots get-out-the-vote tactics with hastily devised online innovations.

The voter-mobilization strategies were part of a broader cyberactivism movement, as young people seized the Internet and other digital

technologies to promote a variety of political causes.⁴ Youth joined the growing ranks of “citizen journalists” launching their own online media to use the Internet as a powerful megaphone. The easy availability of software produced an explosion of blogs, online publications, and streaming-video outlets, enabling young activists to add their voices to the cacophony of conversations taking place in cyberspace. Some cyberactivists mobilized to fight over the very future of the Internet itself, engaging in “online civil disobedience” and taking on powerful corporations in public-policy battles over the control of digital media.

Rocking the Vote

Founded in 1990, Rock the Vote was a pioneer in the youth-vote movement, serving as a prototype for a series of similar efforts throughout the decade and well into the twenty-first century. Through its association with MTV, Rock the Vote was one of the first organizations to tap directly into the new youth media, creating a powerful blend of pop culture, activism, and marketing that was tailor-made for the Digital Generation. The movement’s highly visible campaigns featured a succession of popular musicians, from Iggy Pop and Madonna in the early 1990s to the Dixie Chicks in 2004. Rock the Vote enlisted thousands of volunteers across the country to reach out to youth in popular venues—at rock concerts and media events, and aboard the Rock the Vote and MTV Choose or Lose buses. Rock the Vote’s Web site pulsed with vibrant interactivity, beckoning visitors to e-mail their congressional representatives, join the Street Team, and show up at the nearest “meet-up.” In the months leading up to the 2004 election, almost half of the country’s 18–24-year-olds visited the Rock the Vote Web site.⁵

While the organization has become best known for its mission to increase democratic participation among young people, Rock the Vote was created as a self-defense strategy by the music industry, in response to a pressure campaign over the content of record albums during the 1980s. Foreshadowing the V-chip wars of a decade later, the battle over music labeling involved some of the same political players, and followed a similar pattern of advocacy-group campaigns, government pressure, and industry compliance. The Parents Music Resource Coalition (PMRC) was no ordinary parents group; its founders were wives of powerful Washington officials. Tipper Gore was married to Al Gore, then a senator, and Susan Baker to James Baker, treasury secretary. Allied with well-known membership organizations, including the National PTA and the American Medical Asso-

ciation, PMRC launched a campaign against “suggestive” and “offensive” song lyrics in the mid-1980s. Through its high-level connections, the groups wielded the power of the press and the strong arm of Congress to cast the public spotlight onto the shrouded world of youth music culture, reading raunchy lyrics into the congressional record and releasing lists of “offensive” recordings to the media.⁶ Just as congressional actions in the 1990s were to create a climate of pressure for the television industry, hearings on Capitol Hill during the 1980s ultimately forced the music industry to agree to self-regulatory labels.⁷ In 1985, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) entered into an agreement with PMRC to create warning stickers for albums that contained references to suicide, violence, drugs, sex, and alcohol.⁸

But some members of the music industry strongly opposed the agreement, arguing that RIAA’s deals threatened free expression. Nor did the labeling pact prevent further criticism of music lyrics. By 1988—an election year when Al Gore ran in the Democratic presidential primary—PMRC was again on the march, this time over what it saw as inadequate industry compliance with the existing labeling agreement. With this rising tide of criticism continuing to plague the music business, industry insiders told the trade press they were feeling “disenfranchised” and “powerless.” Several record executives decided to take more strategic action in “self-defense.” As Jeff Ayeroff and Jordan Harris of Virgin Records saw it, the push to regulate the music industry was coming mainly from a “dated constituency” of parents, lawmakers, and other older Americans, while the consumers of record albums—primarily young people—were not involved. What the music industry needed, they thought, was some way to mobilize its customer base to fight back. Since the battles were played out in the halls of Congress, one of the most important elements of this strategy would be to create a campaign to encourage more young people to vote.⁹ With the youth vote in steady decline, assaults on youth music culture could be a perfect cause around which to reengage political participation.

In 1990, Ayeroff and Harris convened an industry meeting in L.A. to “organize a voter registration campaign aimed at young record-buyers and concertgoers,” marshalling the marketing expertise and financial coffers of the music business for the effort.¹⁰ The plan was to employ a variety of popular music venues to reach youth, including music retail stores, MTV shows, and concerts, “to use people who we know have an influence with our audience—namely all the musicians and performers on MTV.”¹¹ “If we

can make stars of Madonna and Paula Abdul and M.C. Hammer," organizers told the press, "we can get people voting."¹² Rock the Vote was launched at the September 1990 MTV Music Video Awards show, with the support of a broad array of music artists, celebrities, and companies.¹³ One of its first campaigns was to push for passage of the National Voter Registration Act.¹⁴

In mid-1992, Senator Al Gore (D-TN), chosen as Bill Clinton's vice-presidential running mate, was in a rather awkward position when he went to Hollywood to solicit entertainment-industry support for the ticket. His record on Capitol Hill was scrutinized closely, and some executives asked for assurances that no further actions against the music business would come from Washington if Clinton and Gore were elected. By this time, however, the threats had subsided. PMRC had pulled back from its confrontational stance, repositioning itself as a clearinghouse for information about music labeling.¹⁵ While conservative critics continued to rail at the music industry for corrupting the values of youth, Democratic candidates backed off of that segment of the entertainment industry, and Tipper Gore receded into the background on culture issues.¹⁶

Ironically, the very group that had been created to counter Tipper Gore's campaign against music lyrics may well have helped elect her husband. The 1992 election was Rock the Vote's first all-out, star-studded voter-registration effort. In partnership with MTV, the group enlisted an army of celebrities in a series of media events, concert tours, and public-service messages to promote its message. "We got two options," rapper Ice-T chanted in a series of unconventional PSAs on MTV. "Either vote or hostile takeover. I'm down with either one. We're youth; we have to change things." As *Time* magazine observed, pop star Madonna "literally wraps her otherwise scantily clad body in the American flag and cries out 'Vote!' to the staccato rhythms of her hit song, *Vogue*, ending with the admonition, 'if you don't vote, you're going to get a spankie.'" These compelling appeals were complemented by more conventional grassroots, get-out-the-vote tactics. MTV collaborated with the League of Women Voters to produce and distribute a user-friendly guide to voter registration in all fifty states. The music network also assigned 24-year-old reporter Tabitha Soren to cover the election from a youth perspective, airing regular segments as part of a new Choose or Lose campaign.¹⁷

Presidential candidates in the 1992 election took their campaigns to MTV, late-night talk shows, and other unconventional venues as a strategy for circumventing traditional news and reaching youth voters directly.¹⁸ Bill Clinton played the saxophone on the *Arsenio Hall Show* and

appeared on an MTV youth forum, where he fielded questions on a range of contemporary topics.¹⁹ In contrast, President George W. Bush avoided the youth cable network until the end of the campaign. When he finally consented to be interviewed by Soren, "he did so while drinking a cup of coffee, exuding body language of discomfort and even contempt. By comparison, Clinton looked like the hippest of hepcats," recalled music industry executive Danny Goldberg in his book *Dispatches from the Culture Wars*.²⁰

By election day, Rock the Vote and its partners in the youth-vote effort claimed to have registered 350,000 new voters, taking credit for helping to reverse a twenty-year decline in youth voter turnout.²¹ The Clinton-Gore ticket garnered the majority of voters age 18–24.²² In January, Rock the Vote hosted a glitzy inaugural ball for the new president and vice-president. A few months later, the group celebrated another victory at the signing of the new National Voter Registration Act on the White House lawn. Cofounder Jeff Ayeroff was among the celebrants, referring to his new political group as a "rock & roll rifle association."²³

Rock the Vote's privileged position within the music industry gave the nonprofit unique access to a stable of popular performers and celebrities, who were eager to link their names with the cause. Its close partnership with MTV placed the group at the forefront of youth media culture and enhanced the music network's legitimacy as a social force. Its yearly awards events earned it a prominent place among the other show-biz spectacles of glitz and glamour. Corporations seeking to reach the youth market enthusiastically jumped on the Rock the Vote cause-marketing bandwagon, inserting their brands into its high-profile campaigns. Pepsi underwrote \$1.2 million of a Rock the Vote television program that aired on both Fox and MTV. Reebok supported a campus tour, selling T-shirts and cups with the Rock the Vote logo at its stores, and funneling a portion of the proceeds back to the nonprofit.²⁴

Throughout the next decade, the nonprofit continued its campaign to mobilize young voters, while other groups—such as World Wrestling Entertainment's Smackdown Your Vote!—modeled their efforts on Rock the Vote's successful blend of pop culture and politics.²⁵ Employing state-of-the-art techniques, the nonprofit enlisted the help of M80—the same youth-marketing company that ran guerilla street-marketing campaigns for the Backstreet Boys, 'N Sync, and other popular musical groups.²⁶ Rock the Vote also began expanding its agenda beyond voting to encompass a variety of hot-button liberal political issues particularly relevant to youth.²⁷ In addition to advocating free expression, a core goal from the beginning,

the group sought to engage young people in issues such as education, violence, health care, the environment, discrimination, and money.²⁸ The group also expanded its brand into additional media outlets beyond MTV, seeking partnerships with ESPN, Telemundo, BET, WB, Fox, and other networks with large youth audiences.²⁹

Rock the Vote quickly achieved a level of credibility and influence that trumped that of many other nonprofits attempting to engage youth. Foundations viewed the nonprofit as a worthwhile investment for their charitable giving, and a direct connection to the populations they sought to help.³⁰ With the high-stakes 2000 presidential election on the horizon, the Pew Charitable Trusts awarded the group more than \$3 million over a two-year period beginning in 1998, to support an intensive campaign "to promote civic engagement among young adults."³¹ This influx of funds enabled the group to launch a massive campaign, harnessing the power of both traditional media and digital technologies in a renewed get-out-the-vote effort. But while the group boasted gains in youth-voter registration, the overall voter turnout by young people was disappointing.³² The controversy surrounding the long, contentious vote-counting process in 2000 was hardly inspiring for youth, so the group used the experience to call for further activism. "Young people have long suspected that something is wrong with the political system," Rock the Vote's Web site told its visitors. "The 2000 presidential election proved that the electoral process is flawed. The time has come to defend the most fundamental American right—the right to vote."³³

Youth as e-Citizens

The outcome of the 2000 election, and the disappointing youth turnout, helped spawn numerous new initiatives aimed at increasing the youth vote. Some projects were housed in the ivy halls of the nation's universities, as foundations invested large sums of money to find out why youth were not voting and to develop innovative ways to reengage them. In 2001, the Pew Charitable Trusts funded a new Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement at the University of Maryland.³⁴ Two years later, with another national election on the horizon, Harvard University's Institute of Politics, working with other colleges and universities around the country, established a National Campaign for Political and Civic Engagement.³⁵ Polls and focus groups were conducted, producing a spate of new primers, guides, and fact sheets, all available for instant downloading from the Internet, about how to reach and engage young voters.

For example, CIRCLE released the fact sheet "Young People and Political Campaigning on the Internet."³⁶ And George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management issued the special report "Campaigning to the Internet Generation."³⁷

A growing number of advocacy groups, political parties, and youth organizations began going online to spread the word about youth voting and to engage young people directly, many offering online voter-registration links. The nonprofit Youth Vote Coalition served as a portal to numerous local and national youth-vote initiatives, providing statistics on youth voting; links to voting, academic, state, and federal Web sites; a state-by-state voters guide; legislative updates; a digest of news on civic participation; and listings of offline events.³⁸ Both major political parties had their own youth-vote initiatives. The GOP launched the Young Republicans' Online Community Network as well as a Web site for the College Republican National Committee. The conservative America's Future Foundation, "a network of America's next generation of classical liberal leaders," offered a political commentary "Webzine" called Brainwash. Democratic Party Web sites included the College Democrats of America and the Young Democrats of America. The unconventional Republican Youth described itself as "a nationwide network of Republican students and young professionals who believe in developing a generation of Republican leaders who are pro-choice, pro-environment and pro-fiscal responsibility."³⁹

By the next presidential election in 2004, these online efforts were joined by dozens more, creating what political scientists W. Lance Bennett and Michael Xenos called a "youth engagement Web sphere" on the Internet that was far larger and more sophisticated than any before.⁴⁰

Moving On and Meeting Up

The digital tactics that would come to define much of the 2004 election had their roots in the burst of innovation at the heart of e-commerce. Moveon.org was one of several "political-technical hybrid organizations" that would play a significant role. Created by Wes Boyd and Joan Blades, two Silicon Valley software developers who used the profits from their company to fund the venture, MoveOn drew heavily from the experimental business models of the dot-com era. As Garance Franke-Ruta wrote in *The American Prospect*, "the Internet boom created a new base of wealth free from long-standing allegiances or deep involvement in traditional political circles and a new generation of individuals steeped in the boom years' free-agent, entrepreneurial, startup mentality."⁴¹ MoveOn.com burst

into the public arena during the 1998 scandal over President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky and the ensuing impeachment proceedings, launching a Web-based "flash campaign" that flooded Capitol Hill with 2 million e-mail messages and more than 250,000 phone calls, urging lawmakers to "censure and move on."⁴²

In many ways, MoveOn's strategy was emblematic of a new kind of "arm-chair activism," requiring little more for democratic participation than the simple mouse clicks and minimal data entry involved in a routine e-commerce transaction. As Boyd explained, MoveOn took advantage of the essential "stickiness" of the Internet to develop a following of loyal members who, through the instantaneous interactivity of the new medium, could be directed to take concerted, collective action aimed toward a specific goal. "We don't look at our work as persuasion or education," he explained, but people can be motivated to act if you provide services to them. "If they hear from you, they will sign up and stick with you." Creating these dynamic, ongoing, and loyal relationships required continual "servicing."⁴³ The liberal nonprofit chose its campaigns carefully, focusing on "populist issues, ones that have real, broad resonance, and are easily understood," where there is a "disconnect" between public opinion and government action.⁴⁴ It also used the Internet not only to direct mass actions, but also to solicit input on policy positions and ad campaigns, and to organize and orchestrate "offline" political action by its members—ranging from candlelight vigils against the war in Iraq, to meetings with congressional members in local districts, to grassroots screenings of filmmaker Michael Moore's movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*.⁴⁵ During its first two years, political scientist Michael Cornfield observed, "MoveOn matured from a record-setting publicity magnet into a unique breed of pressure group: a citizen portal that blends the community spirit of grassroots movements with the sophisticated tactics of a PAC."⁴⁶

As the Bush Administration made its public case for an invasion of Iraq in late 2002, MoveOn made plans to run a protest ad in the *New York Times*. Within twenty-four hours the group raised the \$70,000 it needed, and over a three-day period was able to garner more than \$400,000 for the cause.⁴⁷ In February 2003, the group orchestrated a "virtual march on Washington," mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people to send simultaneous messages—by e-mail, fax, and telephone—to the Senate and the White House, opposing the impending war on Iraq. Supporters registered online to join the protest, which was billed as a "way to influence policy without leaving your living room." The protesters jammed the switchboard on Capitol Hill and forced Senate offices to hire additional staff for the day to

handle the volume of phone calls.⁴⁸ Later that year, MoveOn sponsored an online contest for an anti-Bush ad to run on TV during the Super Bowl. The Internet solicitation produced 1,500 entries, all of which could be viewed on the group's Web site.⁴⁹ Two particularly virulent ads, which compared Bush to Adolph Hitler, prompted outcries from critics that MoveOn had crossed a line into hate mongering. The group countered that it had not endorsed the spots, while acknowledging that they had been "in poor taste."⁵⁰ After MoveOn raised the \$2 million to buy airtime for the winning commercial, CBS refused to air the ad, citing its policy against issue-advocacy ads. The group responded by launching a national campaign to buy time on individual TV stations around the country. For the first time, observed *Wired* magazine, "the most advanced campaign weaponry, the 30-second attack, was put directly into the hands of the activist base." By this time, the magazine noted, "opposition to the war was merging with the interest in the presidential campaign, and the MoveOn list ballooned to some 2.3 million names," adding that the group had raised more than \$29 million, most of it from small individual donors. Convinced of the powerful potential for MoveOn's special blend of online organizing and fundraising, philanthropist George Soros pledged \$2.5 million in matching money to the nonprofit.⁵¹

Meetup.com was another online innovation that would prove valuable to political-campaign efforts. Its original purpose was not for political organizing, but rather for encouraging the kinds of communities of interest that were essential for building "social capital."⁵² Meetup founder Scott Heifferman was a young online-marketing entrepreneur who had made a fortune creating flashing banner ads. After reading Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, he developed a new Web site that would help provide the social glue for reconnecting an apathetic public.⁵³ Like other social-networking software, Meetup enabled individuals with an interest in any number of arcane activities—from quilting to trading cards to cockapoos—to find like-minded friends in their own local communities. Unlike an online community however, where relationships are almost entirely virtual, Meetup was designed to facilitate real-world connections by providing listings of meetings in cities and towns across the country.⁵⁴

Online Political Citizens

For years, young people had been turning away from traditional news sources, to the great angst of newspapers, network news divisions, and

academic experts. By 2000, more than a third of Americans under thirty relied on late-night comedians for their news, and nearly 80 percent of youth were learning about politics from comedy programs such as *Saturday Night Live* or nontraditional outlets such as MTV.⁵⁵ While many people were alarmed at these trends, some viewed them more optimistically. As Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini wrote in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*:

A Jay Leno monologue satirically pointing out the political ignorance of the general public, a scene from *Law & Order* exploring racial injustice in our legal system, an episode of *The Simpsons* lampooning modern campaign tactics, or an Internet joke about Bill Clinton that generates discussion about the line between public and private behavior can be as politically relevant as the nightly news, maybe more so.⁵⁶

However, a study four years later by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that individuals who learned about politics from entertainment TV programs—whether young or not—were “poorly informed about campaign developments.” In contrast, the study found, “those who learn about the campaign on the Internet are considerably more knowledgeable than the average, even when their higher level of education is taken into account.” And while young people continued to abandon traditional news sources, the study found, they increasingly turned to the Internet for their political information, with approximately one fifth of 18–29-year-olds getting their campaign news from online sources.⁵⁷

The 2004 election also saw the emergence of a new category of Internet users, which researchers at George Washington University labeled “online political citizens.” Though not exclusively youth, this cohort of Internet-savvy political participants included a significant number of young people, with 36 percent of them age 18–34, compared to 24 percent of the general public. A large majority of them (44 percent) had not been politically involved before and had never “worked for a campaign, made a campaign donation or attended a campaign event.” These highly charged, politically engaged individuals eagerly embraced the full array of new online political tools available to them. “They visit campaign Web sites, donate money online, join Internet discussion groups, and read and post comments on Web logs,” the study noted. They also “organize local events through Web sites such as Meetup.com or donate money to their causes on sites such as Moveon.org or grassfire.org.” They “use campaign Web sites as hubs” and

“depend heavily on e-mail to stay in touch with the campaigns, receive news stories and muster support.”⁵⁸ On the cutting edge of technological innovation, the new breed of Digital Age citizens, suggested the researchers, “may be harbingers of permanent change in American politics.”⁵⁹

Democratic primary candidate and Vermont Governor Howard Dean became the poster child of Internet politics, as organizers and supporters alike seized the power of the Web to forge new strategies and tactics. Joe Trippi, Dean’s campaign manager, became a guru of this new style of youth-oriented online politics. In his book chronicling the heady days of the campaign, Trippi wrote enthusiastically of the technological weapons that were assembled into a political arsenal, branded with the candidate’s name, and proudly bandied about to the press. After supporters began using Meetup to find local “Deaniacs” in their own towns, campaign organizers quickly developed their own software to augment the online resource, developing Get Local tools to enable people to enter a zip code and find the closest Dean meeting.⁶⁰ “And in the open-source tradition,” Trippi wrote, “we put the software out there for people not only to use, but also to improve, which they invariably did.” The campaign launched its own DeanLink software, modeled on the popular Friendster social-networking Web site, to give “Dean supporters the chance to meet others like themselves.” DeanLink made it possible to keep track of the people with the largest social networks, encouraging them to enlist their friends in the political effort. The campaign also made full use of blogs, which already were playing a prominent role in campaign politics. “The blogosphere was where we got ideas, feedback, support, money—everything a campaign needs to live,” Trippi recalled. “And the first stop for people who wanted to get involved was often the official Web log, ‘Blog for America,’ . . . where the online campaign began its translation to the real world.” Through the viral marketing power of the Internet, “other bloggers would write about the campaign everyday, quickly spreading the word online, offering commentary, and sometimes second guessing campaign strategy . . . the bulk of the daily blogging about the Dean campaign, like the campaign itself, came from grassroots organizers.”⁶¹ At the outset of the campaign, blogs publicized the first Meetup gatherings, which drove curious Internet users to the campaign Web site, where they were encouraged to sign up and donate.⁶² Though Howard Dean failed to win his party’s nomination, his highly visible campaign created a buzz in the media and served as a model for other Internet-based efforts.

Vote or Die

In the period between the 2000 and 2004 elections, 14 million young people became eligible to vote—3.5 million new eligible voters per year. The population of young citizens had grown to levels not seen since the early 1980s, according to CIRCLE, and was expected to continue growing.⁶³ This expanding youth block was “politically up for grabs,” according to a bipartisan survey conducted in January 2004. “American youth are nearly evenly split when it comes to relating to political parties, and perhaps of greatest importance, most currently say they are independents.” Because members of this new generation were still in the process of developing their own political identities, they were “susceptible to appeals from both political parties.”⁶⁴

Election year 2004 saw the rise of what the *Boston Herald* called a “dizzying array of voter-mobilization efforts.”⁶⁵ A key factor driving this unprecedented level of activity was an important lesson from the most recent federal election—that a very small number of votes could be the deciding factor in determining the winner.⁶⁶ The youth-vote campaigns were particularly intense in the battleground states of Ohio, Wisconsin, Florida, and Oregon. “This year,” observed *Billboard* magazine a few days before election day,

the youth vote is not only being racked, it’s being rapped, punked, mobbed and even smacked down. Generation Y voters have been the target of an unprecedented campaign by rockers (Bruce Springsteen with Vote for Change and Christina Aguilera with Declare Yourself), hip-hoppers (Russell Simmons and the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network) and wrestlers (Hurricane of WWE’s Smack Down Your Vote).⁶⁷

Foundations, music-industry celebrities, corporations, and wealthy donors poured enormous sums of money to infuse new energy into existing youth-vote projects and to spawn new ones. Dozens of efforts were launched, each with its own brand—from Redeem the Vote to Punk Voter to the League of Pissed Off Voters. As their coffers filled with this new influx of money, the campaigns commandeered every possible grassroots and mass-media weapon at their disposal to get the word out. Their tactics included the conventional and the New Age. They set up tents on college campuses across the country, hailing passers-by with an opportunity to register to vote between classes. They launched massive advertising campaigns, filling television screens and billboards with their appeals. And they drafted into their battles a new set of digital tools that already were a daily part of young people’s lives. As Nat Ives observed in the *New York Times*:

All the vote marketers are searching out their targets with a sprawling set of marketing strategies, like sending interactive text messages to cellphones, selling tie-in merchandise like \$20 designer t-shirts, creating Web logs and producing performances by everyone from the Rza of Wu-Tang Clan fame to the Rock n’ Roll Worship Circus.⁶⁸

The New Voters Project, an initiative launched by state Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) in late 2003, and sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management, had an election-cycle budget of \$10 million. Working with more than a half-dozen prominent partners, including Rock the Vote and MTV, the project was focused on massive get-out-the-vote tactics in six grassroots states.⁶⁹ Cast the Vote, which had garnered \$173,000 in foundation funds, and \$150,000 in in-kind donations—including billboards in Yankee Stadium and Times Square—ran PSAs on movie screens and staffed voter-registration tables in the lobbies of movie theaters.⁷⁰ The Youth Vote Coalition was operating with a \$660,000 budget and had amassed a coalition of 106 national groups.⁷¹

Following in the tradition of Rock the Vote, many of the efforts had show-biz, pop-music connections, inserting the cause into the foreground of contemporary youth culture. Founded in 2004 by liberal TV producer Norman Lear, Declare Yourself aimed “to energize and empower a new movement of young voters to participate in the 2004 presidential election,” with a budget of over \$9 million.⁷² The group boasted an impressive group of corporate sponsors, including AXA Financial, Yahoo!, Clear Channel, Friendster, and Tower Records. It also enlisted a who’s who of pop-culture celebrities—including Leonardo DiCaprio, Kirsten Dunst, Reese Witherspoon, and Peter Sarsgaard—for a series of college-campus tours, concerts, and TV shows, as well as a blitz of advertising.⁷³ “We’re approaching a cause as a brand,” explained an ad-agency executive involved in the campaign, “it’s not any different than any corporate American company . . . it’s all about creating a brand of passion for consumers.”⁷⁴ To promote its Declare Yourself/Yahoo! Online Voter Registration Drive, pop-singer icon Christina Aguilera was displayed on a massive billboard on Hollywood’s Sunset Boulevard with her mouth sewn shut, along with the slogan “Only You Can Silence Yourself.”⁷⁵

Music was the common link among many of the youth-vote initiatives, as a record number of musicians threw themselves into the cause and new groups were formed to encourage more participation by artists. “The idea was pretty simple,” explained the Web site for Music for America (MFA), an organization launched in 2003. “There are bands out there who would

like to bring a positive political message to their fans. There are fans who want to help spread that message. All we need to do is hook them up and provide some good materials."⁷⁶ Billing itself as a "peer-to-peer, decentralized, youth mobilization movement," MFA sponsored a series of live concerts around the country, amassing local grassroots volunteers in every city, using blogs and other Internet tools to promote the events and link individuals together.⁷⁷ As one observer noted, "many of the musicians involved with these organizations claim that they understand better than anyone how young people feel about politics, mostly because they too are voting for the first time in 2004."⁷⁸ "I've been thinking about and talking about voting for a long time," said Ani DiFranco in a June 2004 article in *Billboard* magazine, explaining why she had decided to launch her Vote Dammit Tour to target young people in the swing states. "Unlike my anarchist friends, I think it's a pretty good idea. I think we've tried not voting, and that doesn't work."⁷⁹

The Hip Hop Summit Action Network (HSAN) had been around for three years before the 2004 election, launched by rap-music mogul Russell Simmons with a series of events headlined by hip-hop musicians and aimed at urban and Hispanic youth. Like *Rock the Vote*, its original goal had been a response to growing onslaughts against the popular music form.⁸⁰ Partnering with *Rock the Vote*, *Smackdown Your Vote*, *Choose or Lose*, and others, HSAN launched a renewed get-out-the-youth-vote campaign for the upcoming election, vowing to register "two million more in 2004."⁸¹ In July 2004, rap star, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs announced his new voter mobilization group, *Citizen Change*, with a compelling slogan that reflected the high-stakes nature of the upcoming election: *Vote or Die!* The new organization featured its own A-list of musical celebrities, including Snoop Dogg, Jay-Z, and 50 Cent. Offering a raft of *Vote or Die!* T-shirts to his fans, Combs was making plans to take his cause directly to both upcoming nominating conventions, and to "serve as a wake up call to young and minority voters as it turns up the heat on the 2004 election." Promising a "get out the vote campaign on a scale and style that has never been seen before in America," the musician vowed to "blanket every space that young people travel in with images that they relate to with its powerful 'Vote or Die' message."⁸²

Like the counterculture movement decades before, the blending of music and politics was a powerful concoction that resonated with young people. It was also an effective strategy for reaching out to segments of the youth population who felt disconnected from public life. In the case of African-American youth, for example, "Hip Hop is an avenue that validates and

credentials politics and civic engagement," explained a report by pollsters Lake, Snell, and Perry. "There are few things this cohort holds in higher esteem than the culture," the report said, noting that 88 percent of African-American voters found hip-hop credible on politics, with 48 percent regarding it as very credible. "Hip hop not only brings excitement and attention to the cause," the report explained, "it also brings validation and may be a requisite for messaging among young African American voters."⁸³

For the music industry, fans helped infuse traditional marketing campaigns with a loftier mission. Warner Music Group slapped voter-awareness stickers on its CDs, with links to its Web site, which in turn linked to other youth-vote Web sites. Warner also added "vote" message tags to its TV and radio advertising as well as the promotional and marketing material used by its grassroots and street-marketing teams.⁸⁴

Some campaigns were aimed at a broad audience, others at more narrow demographic segments of the youth population. The Advertising Council's PSA campaign to "Fight Mannequinism" encouraged 18–24-year-olds to "stay involved with their communities by doing what they can, when they can. Whether it is by voting in local elections, volunteering in their spare time, or just reading the newspaper and discussing current events with their friends." Modeled on the truth[®] antismoking campaign, the project used the Web and TV spots to reach youth by humorously showing "what happens when people become inactive and aren't involved—they turn into mannequins."⁸⁵ L.A.-based *Voces del Pueblo* (voices of the people) targeted Latino youth "who are most likely to opt out of participating in the electoral process."⁸⁶ The *Black Youth Vote* project partnered with BET for a black college tour, with a budget of \$5 million.⁸⁷ *Redeem the Vote* aimed to register "people of faith regardless of party affiliation, or personal political beliefs, but as a matter of Christian principle."⁸⁸ Gay and lesbian youth activists from both political parties organized their peers to vote. The *National Stonewall Democrats* launched the *Stonewall Student Network*; the *Log Cabin Republicans* organized a leadership forum and a series of campus outreach efforts.⁸⁹

While the majority of youth-vote efforts claimed to be bipartisan, the rhetoric that many youth used reflected an anger targeted specifically at the policies of the Bush Administration. Kristin Jones, writing in the *Nation*, profiled a new generation of get-out-the-vote youth groups fueled by strong anti-Bush sentiment.⁹⁰ "This spring, with an eye on mobilizing angry punks," she wrote, *Punk Voter* was using "hard-edged, partisan tactics," noting that the group had enlisted musicians Jello Biafra, NOFX,

Alkaline Trio and Authority Zero in its Rock Against Bush tour, drawing sold-out crowds in California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, and Arizona. The League of Pissed Off Voters (part of Indyvoter.org) was "one of the first groups to try to establish a voting bloc specifically on the basis of being young and angry," Jones observed. The group's book *How to Get Stupid White Men out of Office: The Anti-politics, Un-boring Guide to Power*, coedited by Adrienne Brown and William Wimsatt, was a grassroots primer for translating anger into action. The introduction offered a contradictory message that was emblematic of the conflicting attitudes of many young progressives, urging followers to vote Democrat while acknowledging that "Democrats are not our friends."⁹¹

The Internet was a central part of all these campaigns, not only providing each effort with a direct means for reaching its target audience, but also fostering collaboration among the groups, and forging virtual coalitions through links and cross-promotion strategies. This online fluidity enabled visitors to travel across Web sites quickly and effortlessly, gathering information, communicating with others, and joining whatever effort matched their interests and passions. Most of the Web sites offered a link to online voter-registration, providing a form of instant gratification unparalleled by any other means. On the Rock the Vote site, for example, a Register to Vote tab linked to a pop-up window with a voter-registration form that visitors could print and mail to their state elections office, under the slogan "Fill it and print it, lick it and mail it."⁹² Many campaigns promoted peer-to-peer viral-marketing efforts, mimicking the strategies of commercial marketers. Through social-networking software, the online world also served as a powerful enabler for thousands of "offline," real-world efforts, from concerts to rallies to protests.

Moveon.org, already a trailblazer in Internet organizing, launched Click Back America, a "college click drive," in March 2004 to raise \$1 million from students around the country for an advertising campaign attacking the Bush presidency.⁹³ By August the effort had morphed into its own branded campaign, MoveonStudentAction.org, organized by two students from Brandeis University, Ario Rabin-Havt and Ben Brandzel. Working with the liberal public-relations firm Fenton Communications, the group launched a series of high-profile efforts to focus attention on the dangers to young people posed by the Bush Administration. Raising money online, MoveonStudentAction bought space in the *New York Times*, where the group published an open letter to President Bush. Signed by 65,000 young people, the letter warned that the Bush policy in Iraq was leading to a post-

election military draft and demanded an exit strategy to end the war. The ad also ran in 155 college newspapers in the battleground states.⁹⁴

Though MoveonStudentAction did not have a particularly compelling, graphically rich Web site, it developed innovative tools to mobilize peers. "What is distinct about our effort," Brandzel later explained, "was that it was 'grassroots driven,' using the online media to generate action, but with 'no personality at the center'." Rather, the Web site itself was the hub. A "Voter Multiplier" page on the MoveonStudentAction site invited members to upload their friends' names and e-mail addresses—from their PalmPilot, Outlook, or Facebook programs—in order to create their own "personal precincts." With a few strokes of a key, each individual could contact hundreds of friends instantly, e-mailing them personalized messages—from "virtual doorhangers" to online voter-registration links to election-day reminders to cast their ballot, along with directions to the right polling place.⁹⁵

Other social-networking sites spawned their own political counterparts. James Hong and Jim Young had created the successful online dating site, HotOrNot, attracting a large following of 18–24-year-olds. For the election, the duo launched a new site called VoteOrNot. The venture was based on the same principle as "connector" marketing efforts such as Procter & Gamble's Tremor that friends could do a much better job of influencing each other than impersonal advertising messages could. To attract people to the site, the sponsors offered a \$200,000 sweepstakes that would be split between the winner and the person who had referred him or her to the site. Members who joined VoteOrNot would be linked to another Web site where they could register to vote. Launched over Labor Day weekend 2004, VoteOrNot signed up more than 100,000 people before the end of October.⁹⁶

The success of Friendster also inspired a political clone, though not an official offshoot of the original social-networking site. Political Friendster was created by Stanford University student Doug McCune, who wanted to "do something that involved the election." So he came up with the idea of using a Web site to illustrate the connections among politicians. "I just had the idea that since it was such a familiar concept for kids my age that using that concept to apply to politics would strike a chord," McCune told the *New York Times*. The site worked like a twenty-first-century version of C. Wright Mills's book *The Power Elite*, identifying who a politician's "friends" were and exposing political connections. Instead of posting their own profiles to the site, visitors would post information about politicians

and then link them to the other people they knew about. For example, clicking on Hillary Clinton revealed that one of her "friends" was Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton and, in turn, that one of Walton's "friends" was President George H. W. Bush, who had awarded the discount-store magnate the Medal of Freedom in 1992. The site, which mimicked the style of Friendster, billed itself as a "parody" of the original. To preempt any copyright problems, McCune posted a disclaimer: "If you're from Friendster and want to sue me, then take a deep breath, calm down, laugh a little bit and chill out."⁹⁷

Branded Activism

Rock the Vote was the most recognizable organization in the youth-vote movement, taking its mobilizing model to a new level during the 2004 election. Through its trademark fusion of consumerism and citizenship, the group created a highly charged campaign designed to penetrate every sector of youth culture. Four corporate sponsors—Dr. Pepper/Seven Up, Unilever's Ben & Jerry's Homemade Ice Cream, Motorola, and Cingular Wireless—paid \$1 million each to support the Voter Registration Bus and Concert Tour. The money from these companies made up 35–40 percent of the nonprofit's \$7–8 million budget for the year, with the group's awards event bringing in another \$1 million and foundation and individual donors making up the rest. Rock the Vote's position in the music industry enabled it to draw from headline bands—including the Dixie Chicks, Alanis Morissette, Snoop Dogg, and the Dave Matthews Band—who provided their services free, performing at fifty-six tour stops between June and November.⁹⁸ The message also was spread through a variety of television channels, magazines, and radio outlets, including MTV, Comedy Central, the WB, and the E cable network.⁹⁹

Equipped with the latest state-of-the-art features, the Web site, *rockthevote.com*, served as the hub of this maelstrom of preelection activity, linking with the growing number of youth-vote initiatives in a synergistic network of online relationships.¹⁰⁰ The site offered numerous ways for individuals to get involved, tailored to a variety of interests, including Chick Vote and Rap the Vote. By registering online, members could join the Rock the Vote Street Team, linking up with others in their communities to become part of the army of volunteers who were registering new voters at concerts, clubs, and campuses across the country.¹⁰¹ Donations could be made easily with a click of the mouse. Just another click was necessary to purchase Rock the Vote gear, including "Give a Shit" T-shirts and branded

thongs.¹⁰² Yet another click would jump to Amazon.com, where the latest CDs by Rock the Vote music-award winners were for sale.¹⁰³ Youth also could participate in the Rock the Vote blog, to learn "what Capitol Hill is saying and find young people's response."¹⁰⁴ The nonprofit went to elaborate means to spread the Rock the Vote brand throughout the Web, including free downloads of banners and radio ads, as well as links to its voter-registration page, available to "anyone and we mean EVERYONE." Groups and individuals even could import the online voter-registration tool and rebrand it for their own Web site. "This unprecedented network of thousands of tools," the Web site predicted, "will make the NEW vote, the SWING vote, and bring 20 million GenNext voters out to the polls this year."¹⁰⁵

The Rock the Vote brand was also propagated through software applications, wireless technologies, and commercial Web sites that married activism and advertising. In partnership with a company called Meca, the nonprofit created Rock the Vote Communicator, a branded version of instant messaging, offering "six available Rock the Vote-themed skins" that were "designed to appeal to the elusive 18–24 voter demographic."¹⁰⁶ The joint venture enabled teens and young adults to chat with their friends and exchange political opinions. It also served as an organizing tool for Street Teams. "As the election draws closer and voter-registration closes," explained one trade publication, "street team volunteers will guide the discussion towards moving to the polls and making sure that their newly minted political activists follow through by pulling the lever of their choice on November 2."¹⁰⁷ The nonprofit linked up with the popular MySpace.com, tapping into its technology and youth user base. "MySpace.com's social-networking platform," a Rock the Vote spokesperson explained to the press, "will exponentially open up communication among young people to Rock the Vote's political tools and street teams." As part of the agreement, MySpace.com agreed to "actively promote Rock the Vote throughout the network," creating a profile of the group, promoting its affiliated musicians, and incorporating a link to its online voter-registration page into the MySpace Home page. The joint effort developed a variety of tools "to inspire, organize and mobilize young people to vote," including MP3s, photos, and buddy icons.¹⁰⁸

Rock the Vote's mobile project was modeled on several successful "smart mob" political efforts in other countries, including campaigns by activists in Spain the night before the March 2004 elections, where "the spread of text messaging mobilized some thousands of people who congregated in front of the political party running the country, Partido Popular, in just a

couple of hours."¹⁰⁹ Rock the Vote's version of these campaigns, however, was an integrated cause-marketing venture with Motorola. To launch Rock the Vote Mobile, Motorola sent e-mail messages to its thousands of cell-phone users, attaching a video that featured Rachel Bilson, star of the popular Fox TV show *The O.C.*, inviting young people to sign up online for the campaign. As an added incentive, the company offered sweepstakes with prizes that included Ben and Jerry's ice cream and Motorola handsets. Through this opt-in process, youth could be plugged into a constant stream of interactive content and activities through their cell phones.¹¹⁰ Biweekly polls were able to "take the pulse of 18–30-year-olds on top-of-mind topics from education and economics to job creation and the war on terrorism," campaign materials explained, and a regular feature asked voters which candidate was "likely to get their vote on election day."¹¹¹ Users could also receive "wake-up calls" and ring tones from Rock the Vote musicians, enter election-related contests, and participate in a variety of text-messaging surveys. Undecided voters could take the "candidate match" survey. After answering ten questions on issues such as the war, the environment, and the economy, they would receive a text message with the name of the candidate who best fit their own values and interests. When asked by one skeptical reporter about the neutrality of such a quiz, especially when administered by a liberal group, a Rock the Vote spokesman responded with assurances that it was "being extraordinarily careful about how the questions are drafted . . . we have a team of attorneys review them to be sure the questions are unbiased, and we link with outside sources to give more information."¹¹²

Through its ongoing partnership with MTV's Choose or Lose campaign, the nonprofit sponsored a "PRElection." The unique effort blurred the lines between music fandom and citizen participation by combining a mock online election with real-world voter-registration. Using special forms approved by the Federal Election Commission, young people were able to cast their votes for president in an MTV.com poll, while at the same time registering to vote in the upcoming real election. Once they had registered for the PRElection, the fans could enter weekly and monthly sweeps and gain access to "exclusive music and videos at MTV.com." Prizes included: "a trip to the MTV Beach House; a July date with an MTV VJ; tickets to the August Video Music Awards; and appearances on *Total Request Live*." By June, MTV had 15,000 registrants and its two spring shows had garnered the highest ratings ever for the network's *Choose or Lose* programming.¹¹³

These combined efforts enabled Rock the Vote to attract an unprecedented number of people to its Web site. A post-election memo tallied the results:

In January 2004, our site saw 3.4 million hits; by July, we had reached 8 million hits per month. In October, the Rock the Vote Web site had 27.4 million hits from people registering to vote, learning about the issues, and finding ways to get involved. In all, we received an incredible 190 million hits for the 2004 election cycle . . . more than 45% of 18–24-year-olds visited our Web site in the months leading up to the election.¹¹⁴

More than 120,000 people joined the Rock the Vote Mobile campaign.¹¹⁵ "We made over 200,000 contacts to this list in the final days of the campaign," the group explained, "including celebrity voice mails that explained how to find a polling place through the Web or through an automatic patch-through to 1800MYVOTE1." Online voter registrations totaled 1.2 million.¹¹⁶ The election-year initiative also generated a sizable database for the nonprofit.¹¹⁷

With the 2004 election, the music industry's original plan to mobilize its consumer base, hatched nearly two decades earlier, had come to full fruition. Rock the Vote had forged a new model for democratic participation, one that merged the roles of fan, consumer, and citizen in the youth media culture of the Digital Age. As other groups followed in Rock the Vote's path, music was fully integrated into their mobilization efforts, with major labels providing funds, lending their artists to the movement, and incorporating get-out-the-vote slogans into their own sales campaigns. In some cases, music celebrities themselves led the way, modern day troubadours who stirred their young fans into action. This powerful merger of pop culture and politics was also the perfect cause-marketing vehicle for corporations, who were able to link their brands to the hope of democratic renewal.

The Reengaged Generation

Two months before the election, CIRCLE teamed up with MTV to survey youth voters between the ages of 18 and 29. The research found that, compared with survey results during the 2000 election, when youth-vote turnout remained low, more than twice as many young registered voters were paying "a lot" of attention to the campaign—as much, the researchers noted, as they were in 1992, when the youth turnout had spiked.¹¹⁸ This

optimistic assessment was shared by several other polls that were closely monitoring the youthvote in the final months and weeks leading up to election day.¹¹⁹

But when the polls closed, initial news accounts were disappointing. "This was not the breakout year for young voters that some had anticipated," reported the Associated Press. Despite the enormous outlays of money and time, it appeared that voter turnout among youth between the ages of 18 and 24 was about the same proportion of the electorate that it had been in 2000.¹²⁰ This first account of the returns was picked up by other news media in the early reporting on the election, playing into the conventional news frame of youth apathy and cynicism. But CIRCLE's Mark Lopez knew that this interpretation could not be right. He and his colleagues immediately began crunching numbers, working through the night, and calling reporters to correct the story.¹²¹ Part of the problem was that the statistics were confusing. As the *San Francisco Chronicle* tried to explain to its readers a few days later, after speaking with CIRCLE staff: "participation among the nation's 40 million 18 to 29 year olds was up—to 20 million, compared with 16.2 million in 2000. But so was voting across the board. With a total voter turnout greater than 120 million, the much ballyhooed youth voters turned out to be 1 out of 10, which is just about exactly the percentage they were four years ago."¹²² But even these complex explanations didn't tell the final story, which could not be determined until six months later, when the U.S. Census Bureau released its official results. When it did, the findings were dramatic. Voter turnout among youth had reached the highest level in more than a decade. "The increase in turnout by the youngest voters, age 18–24, was higher than any other age group," CIRCLE explained, "making it a significant and disproportionate factor in the overall jump in the number of Americans going to the polls last fall." The turnout rate among voters under age 25 had jumped 11 points, from 36 to 47 percent between 2000 and 2004, while the overall voter turnout rate increased by about 4 points, from 60 to 64 percent.¹²³ Commenting on these numbers, CIRCLE labeled the young voters "the Re-engaged Generation."¹²⁴

In a fact sheet released a few months later, CIRCLE suggested that "the confluence of extensive voter outreach efforts, a close election, and high levels of interest in the 2004 campaign all worked to drive voter turnout among people to levels not seen since 1992." But the researchers expressed some caution in reading too much into these results, adding that "it remains to be seen if this increase in voter turnout in 2004 is part of a new trend, or is instead a spike like that in the 1992 election."¹²⁵

While it was difficult to predict whether the level of engagement among youth would remain this high, it was clear that other trends during the 2004 election were likely to continue. Calling it a "breakout year for the role of the Internet in politics," a report by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 75 million Americans "used the internet to get political news and information, discuss candidates and debate issues via e-mail, or participate directly in the political process by volunteering or giving contributions to candidates."¹²⁶

Freeing the Culture

If music was a touchstone for the youth-vote movement, it played a far different, but no less important, role in the "free culture" movement. These activists were also avid fans, and some were musicians themselves. (Many were participants in the 2004 get-out-the-vote efforts.) But rather than joining hands with the industry, they organized against it, taking on the large corporations that controlled much of youth popular culture. At the heart of their battles was a passionate belief that young people should be creators and shapers of a new participatory free culture, rooted in the inherent capacities of the Internet. Like the rest of their generation, these activists had grown up with digital technology, internalizing the ease of use, accessibility, freedom, and constant connectivity that went along with them. And like their contemporaries in the youth-vote movement, they were able to seize the new digital tools as weapons for their political efforts, in this case to challenge the public policies and corporate interests that were influencing the future direction of the Internet itself.

Most of these young activists were still in high school in 1998, when the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) passed Congress. The legislation had been hotly debated within the closed circle of K-Street Washington lobbyists and a handful of public interest groups. But with little mainstream press coverage for this arcane, inside-the-Beltway issue, the public was largely unaware of the law. The DCMA was a response to corporate fears that control of copyrighted material was being undermined by a new generation of digital technologies that made it easy to download, distribute, and change content. Increasingly, copyright protections were built directly into the software of many commercial applications, designed to thwart such activities.¹²⁷ The new law criminalized the production and dissemination of technologies that could circumvent these encoded copy-protection devices, imposing penalties as high as ten years in prison or \$1 million in fines for willful violations of the provision.¹²⁸

The full implication of the DMCA, which took effect in 2000, was not apparent immediately. As digital media became increasingly personalized, many young people maintained a strong sense of intimacy and ownership in their relationships to new technologies. What they did in their daily lives seemed far removed from distant policy matters.¹²⁹ But the widely publicized lawsuits by the recording industry placed youth in the middle of a hotbed of controversy and debate. Suddenly the long arm of the law was reaching not only into their online experiences, but also into their homes and schools.

The cofounders of Downhillbattle.org—Holmes Wilson, Tiffiny Cheng, and Nicholas Reville—were college students when the lawsuits against Napster first made headlines. All of them shared a passion for both music and technology. As they watched the public debate over Internet file-sharing, they became increasingly frustrated and angry over what they saw as one-sided coverage by the press. They believed reporters were ignoring the role that the music industry itself was playing by failing to respond to the changing needs of its customers. They also thought that the negative coverage of file-sharing had ignored the public benefits of the popular practice. In their view, sharing music online could give people equal access to a “treasure trove of culture,” instead of allowing radio disk jockeys and record companies to be gatekeepers.¹³⁰

The activists took to the Web, where they could present their case “in a clear and simple and funny way” and tap into the viral nature of Internet communication to spread the word and reach a “ton of people.” One of their key tactics was to create “stunt pages” in order to “throw a rock in the debate.” Like other cyberactivists, the group figured out that with a minimum of technical skill, it was possible to put up a Web site overnight, mimicking the style and content of corporate sites so that search engines would take users directly to the spoof site.¹³¹ Their first stunt page was iTunes Is Bogus. The parody was similar to many of the tactics in the anti-tobacco truth® campaign, following the design of the official iTunes Web page, but carrying a message that attacked the company. A headline at the top read: “iTunes Music Store. Facelift for a Corrupt Industry.” The rest of the page carried a series of essays, framing much of the argument in consumer-oriented language. “Let’s start simple,” the first essay began, “the iTunes Music Store is not a good value for customers.” While iTunes claimed that people could buy entire CD albums for \$8–12, the site explained, this was much more than CDs would cost at Amazon or eBay, where they could be picked up used for \$5. “If you don’t care about liner notes,” the Web site advised, “you can burn the CD from a friend for 25

cents and send the musician a buck, and you can always use iTunes to rip it onto your computer or mp3 player.”¹³² This kind of irreverent tone, advocating “digital civil disobedience,” and providing explicit instructions for acting out against copyright law, was characteristic of Downhill’s approach.¹³³ To augment their online strategy, the activists began pitching stories to reporters, directing them to the Web site. “Because there was a real void and the need for another point of view,” the group recalled, “the press was often willing to print quotes from our three-day old organization.” As a result, Downhill Battle was able to gain national press exposure.¹³⁴

What a Crappy Present was another of the group’s stunt pages. This “antiadvertisement for CDs,” featured a photo of a little girl opening a Christmas present under the tree, her face a mass of disappointment at the CD inside. The Web page offered advice to children who found themselves in similar situations, along with information for their clueless parents. “Kids today are so good at downloading music from the Internet,” the site explained, “that most of them already have all the music they like on their computer, or if they don’t have it yet they can get it in 10 minutes.” Launched during the highly publicized lawsuits against families whose children were accused of illegally downloading music, the spoof site offered instructions on how to avoid legal problems: “If your family turns off ‘sharing,’ downloading songs is 100% safe.” It also advocated consumer boycotts, reminding parents, “when you buy major label CDs you’re paying companies to sue families and marginalize independent music.” The advice to kids was much more explicit and subversive. The Web site displayed step-by-step instructions for purposeful disobedience, illustrated with pictures of a child carrying them out. “Try to find the receipt,” it suggested. “A parent’s wallet or purse is a good place to start looking.” After that, “Get yourself to the mall and return the CD,” it advised. “Even if you don’t have the receipt, some places will give you store credit (especially if you act real sad).” Finally: “Find the biggest pack of CD-Rs you can get for the price of the CD (usually 25 or 50). Now you’re back in charge of your music. Rock on!”¹³⁵ According to Downhill Battle, one million people visited the Crappy Present site.¹³⁶

The activists also used the Web to orchestrate collective actions against the music industry. Its Grey Tuesday Internet campaign earned the small upstart group widespread recognition within the online activist community, as well as mainstream press coverage. It began when a disk jockey took music from the Beatles’s *White Album* and remixed it with tracks from hip-hop artist Jay-Z’s *Black Album*, producing a new hybrid *Grey Album*. As

scholar Sam Howard-Spink explained in his case study of the Grey Tuesday campaign, these “mash-up” or “bootleg” albums were created by cultural artists who remixed elements from existing musical pieces together into a new genre of hybrid works. With origins dating back to the early days of hip-hop, the creation of “sample-based” or “remixed” recordings had accelerated with the advent of digital technologies, online networks, and file-sharing software.¹³⁷ But while increasingly popular among a growing number of music aficionados, remixing ran up against the interests of powerful music corporations. In the case of the *Grey Album*, EMI Records and Capitol Records, the companies that owned the copyright on the sound recordings of the *White Album*, threatened legal action against the DJ and “anyone who sold or distributed the *Grey Album*.” Downhill Battle swiftly moved into action, staging an online protest, and offering free downloads of the album on its Web site. As Internet activist groups had done a decade before to protest the Communications Decency Act, more than 400 Web sites participated in Grey Tuesday, turning their sites “grey” for a day, with nearly 200 of them hosting their own downloads of the controversial album. Activists at Downhill Battle used the event as a way to publicize their concerns over copyright law, generating attention from major news outlets, including the *New York Times*, MTV, and the BBC.¹³⁸

Downhill Battle soon extended its efforts beyond these attention-getting stunts. Like many of their generation, the activists had a passion and facility for using new digital technologies to create and distribute their own work.¹³⁹ Sharing the zeal of other open-source advocates, the group began developing and promoting technologies for creating a do-it-yourself “free culture.”¹⁴⁰ It established a nonprofit Participatory Culture Foundation and launched new software applications, such as the Broadcast Machine, available for free to anyone wanting to develop online “peer-to-peer television.”¹⁴¹ Advertising the software on its Web site, the group promised a new vision for future media: “You (and any other individual or organization) will be able to publish full-screen, high-quality video to thousands and potentially millions of people at zero cost. . . . We are offering free support to organizations that are interested in starting channels. . . . it will take you less than one hour to set up your own channel.”¹⁴² Through these peer-to-peer channels, “kids can get TV from one another rather than from Viacom.”¹⁴³

A truly participatory culture, however, required more than creating innovative software. It also depended on a legal and technological infrastructure that would support peer-to-peer communication, production, and distribution. Policies such as the DMCA threatened this kind of

“open architecture” upon which the Internet had been founded. The law’s impact on music distribution was a concrete illustration of the way in which corporate practices and government regulations could affect the fluidity and openness of digital media. With its aim to “create a decentralized music business and a level playing field for independent musicians and labels,” Downhill Battle joined a growing number of music activist groups that were attempting to change the way music was created and distributed.¹⁴⁴

Organizations such as the Future of Music Coalition (FMC) saw digital technologies as a way to loosen “the stranglehold of major labels, major media, and chain-store monopolies.” Founded in 2000 by a group of independent musicians, FMC’s mission was to “address pressing music-technology issues and to serve as a voice for musicians in Washington, DC, where critical decisions are being made regarding musicians’ intellectual property rights without a word from the artists themselves.”¹⁴⁵ These groups were allied with other advocates engaged in policy debates over the future of digital media. Public Knowledge was established to fight for a “vibrant electronic commons” in the digital landscape, participating in congressional debates and regulatory proceedings over highly technical policies such as “broadcast flag” and “open access” to cable broadband platforms.¹⁴⁶ The Electronic Frontier Foundation, by this time one of the oldest Internet-policy organizations, also was active in the intellectual-property debate, describing itself as “a modern group of freedom fighters” engaged in defending “the vast wealth of digital information, innovation, and technology that resides online.”¹⁴⁷

Many of the activists were deeply influenced by the writings and teachings of Lawrence Lessig, a law professor whose widely popular books, *Code*, *The Future of Ideas*, and *Free Culture*, provided the intellectual underpinnings for a growing free-culture movement.¹⁴⁸ His books earned him a wide following within the general public and among intellectuals. A popular speaker on the college lecture circuit, Lessig was able to translate legalistic jargon into compelling and vivid prose, providing illustrations that resonated particularly well with the experiences and values of the Digital Generation. While a strong supporter of legal protections for copyright, he provided a well-documented set of arguments that the current direction of intellectual-property regulation in the United States was threatening not only the Internet, but also the larger culture. “Capturing and sharing content,” he explained, “is what humans have done since the dawn of man. It is how we learn and communicate.” But capturing and sharing through digital technology is different, explained Lessig:

You could send an e-mail telling someone about a joke you saw on Comedy Central, or you could send the clip. You could write an essay about the inconsistencies in the arguments of the politician you most love to hate, or you could make a short film that puts statement against statement. You could write a poem to express your love, or you could weave together a string—a mash-up—of songs from your favorite artists in a collage and make it available on the Net.¹⁴⁹

The problem with the new DMCA, Lessig pointed out, was that it went too far, essentially undermining the very structure and operation of the Internet, which had been built on openness, sharing, and the notion of individuals building on each other's work. The DMCA, as well as other digital copyright-protection schemes, prevented many legal uses of content, shutting down the opportunity for the kind of sharing and building on other people's work that had been essential to the growth and enrichment of cultural experience. "We come from a tradition of 'free culture,'" Lessig explained. "A free culture is not a culture without property, just as a free market is not a market in which everything is free. The opposite of a free culture is a 'permission culture'—a culture in which creators get to create only with the permission of the powerful, or of creators from the past."¹⁵⁰

Lessig also put some of these ideas into practice by setting up the Creative Commons, a nonprofit that enabled copyright holders to create "flexible licenses" that would set the terms under which others could use their work, and thus offer an alternative to the rigidity of current copyright law.¹⁵¹ He called for a more balanced approach to copyright that would foster competition and innovation in the distribution of music and other content, without harming copyright holders.¹⁵² Lessig was joined by intellectuals and policy advocates calling for open access to broadband technologies, open-source software, and other proposals to promote full participatory culture in the Internet Age.¹⁵³

Lessig's teachings also inspired the creation of a new youth organization dedicated to spreading the free-culture message among college students. The group Freeculture.org began in 2003 as a small club of Internet enthusiasts at Swarthmore College. Like Downhill Battle, the group's first online stunt vaulted it into the national spotlight. A hacker got into the computer system at the Diebold Corporation, maker of high-tech paperless voting machines. Among the thousands of e-mail messages retrieved were some embarrassing internal communications suggesting that there were serious problems with the new system. Immediately, the messages spread throughout the Internet, prompting the company to issue cease-and-desist letters to a number of Internet service providers, claiming that the information was protected under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. When Nelson

Pavlovsky and Luke Smith learned of the e-mail messages, they posted them on their Web site, and encouraged other student activists around the country to do the same.¹⁵⁴ They also contacted the Electronic Frontier Foundation, working with the organization's lawyers to sue Diebold for abusing copyright law to suppress freedom of speech.¹⁵⁵ The suit attracted national press and congressional attention. Congressman Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) called on the House Judiciary Committee to conduct an investigation. Within three days, Diebold announced it would no longer try to stop the distribution of its memos on the Web.¹⁵⁶

Buoyed by their victory, the student activists decided to launch a more ambitious effort. They bought the domain name freeculture.org, invited Lessig to Swarthmore to give a talk, and started promoting chapters at other colleges around the country.¹⁵⁷ Lessig placed a link to the new organization on his own Web site, where his book *Free Culture* could be downloaded for free.¹⁵⁸ Freeculture.org began working with other groups, including Downhill Battle, on a series of Internet campaigns to promote free speech, open-source software, and less restrictive copyright laws.¹⁵⁹

By 2005, freeculture.org organized its first summit of like-minded activists. Billing itself as an "international student movement," the group's Web site listed a growing network of nearly two dozen local campus chapters.¹⁶⁰ "Through the democratizing power of digital technology and the Internet," reads the group's mission statement, "we can place the tools of creation and distribution, communication and collaboration, teaching and learning into the hands of the common person—and with a truly active, connected, informed citizenry, injustice and oppression will slowly but surely vanish from the earth."¹⁶¹

Whether such lofty and ambitious goals ever could be fully realized was uncertain. But these youth Internet activists—in both the 2004 election and the free-culture movement—were demonstrating an investment in digital technology that went beyond their role as consumers. They were taking ownership of the new media as tools for the practice of citizenship.