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I am an engineer by training. As a young person growing up in the city of Detroit and later its suburbs, I witnessed the challenges and promises of technology. The challenges of living in a place singularly dependent on a particular brand of manufacturing is visible to the entire nation in ways that were visible to me, my friends and my family years ago. But the promise of technology as a pathway to empowerment inspired my pursuit of computer engineering and computer science.

As I came of age I sought out ways to connect my passion for technology with my passion for improving the lives of others. As an intern at General Motors, I created a computer learning and coaching manual to help the homeless and impoverished learn the basic computing skills needed for most entry-level employment. I also managed two websites (which have since been retired) that were the foundation of my experience using the Internet for social change:

1. webhands.org – a site developed to connect volunteers and donors to nonprofits in their vicinity
2. patentdonors.org – a site developed to connect owners of unused patents to companies and universities interested in putting them to use

These projects opened my eyes to the use of open networks as tools for encouraging participation, empowerment and social change. Building on this foundation, I have been working as a student, community political organizer armed with technology and infused with passion and inspired by open gates.

**Open Gates**

Democracy's defining characteristic is participation. In both its direct & representative flavors, participatory democracy presupposes interest, understanding and action as the means toward a peaceful, organized society.

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Participation comes in many forms. Discourse. Voting. Volunteering. Public service. Advocacy. To achieve legitimacy and ultimately impact the democratic process, these methods of participation must be equally accessible to everyone. Democracy with restrictions on participation goes by many names.

Openness is a defining characteristic of democracy. Openness means available, visible, and flexible, like an open gate. If the gate is open, anyone can walk through and enjoy what's on the other side.

(The question of who can access the Internet is a separate but important one. It's not the focus of today's discussion, but it is worth noting that openness minus access equals invisibility. Invisible power is inaccessible power.)

In the context of political engagement, the "open gates" metaphor presents itself repeatedly. The walled and gated cities that characterized the kingdoms of ancient history were physical reminders of closed political systems. Growth, evolution, commerce and improvement could only happen when the gates were opened. Open gates are prerequisites for value to be exchanged.

Gates have been opened, or torn down, by choice and by force throughout history. The French peasantry rose in revolution against totalitarian rule. Tibetan monks designed an open and inclusive culture from its inception. These all share a common characteristic: when the gates open, the game changes. More and different voices can be heard. More people can access the table of discourse. Equality can be introduced, debated, and achieved.

History has taught us that such openness has political ramifications. If all are equal, all are influential. If everyone can get anywhere, than anyone can reach everything. Ideas can travel and flourish uncumbered. Controversy can ensue.

This historical lineage laid the foundation for today's Internet. It was a system designed with no gates, no gatekeepers. Access to one part of the Internet implied access to all parts of the Internet. Never before has history seen such an egalitarian utopia.

Over the past decade, use of the Internet for political and community organizing has moved from the fringe to above the fold. It has supplemented, even supplanted many traditional forms of sociopolitical mobilization. This is thanks to the Internet's inherent openness, transparency, flexibility and disruptive potential.

These characteristics give the Internet its empowering quality. Individuals can communicate with strangers, friends and family without hindrance. This flexibility and freedom from fear of retribution inevitably leads to political change.

I can illustrate this point using a few examples that involve video, authentic storytelling, and marginalized people organizing and scaling their influence.

#### **Web video**

There are entire film production houses dedicated to such videos like [Brave New Films](#) in Culver City, CA. Web users sharing videos they watch online with friends and family is one of the most organic ways that political movements grow online. This happens for people with all political persuasions: conservative, progressive, everywhere in between.

Video is revolutionary medium because the human brain is a machine driven by what it sees. The ability to present the views and voices of people with any and every background is enabled by truly open networks. They, like democracy, enable every man, woman, child and idea to have a chance to have an impact.

1. **Tea Party Rapper.** This year there has been a movement building among people disenchanted with the current President, Congress and their policies. Marches and demonstrations have been organized in various parts of the country, including in Washington, DC, thanks in large part to word of mouth and online video. For example, a [rap video](#) (embedded below) was made in support of this "Tea Party" movement that has been viewed on YouTube hundreds of thousands of times. The video includes a call to action for viewers to join a "Tea Party" event near them, and it has proven to be effective.
2. **Every vote counts.** During the final weeks of the 2008 Presidential Election, advocacy groups turned their attention to making sure the maximum amount of their supporters voted. A political science research paper called "[Social Pressure and Voter Turnout: Evidence from a Large-Scale Field Experiment](#)," which was

published in the February 2008 issue of the American Political Science Review (APSR). The paper's authors, who include Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green of Yale University, discovered that direct mailings informing people that their neighbors would find out whether they voted profoundly increased voter turnout. Mailings that urged people to perform their civic duty, in comparison, drove fewer people to the polls. Armed with this knowledge that was available to them online, the liberal group [MoveOn.org](http://MoveOn.org) chose to create an [interactive video](#) when a user could enter a person's name and then email them a video that spoofed a newscast explaining that their candidate lost the election because they didn't vote. These videos were viewed over 21 million times.

### **Authentic storytelling**

Networks whose openness is proactively protected also protect the legitimacy of the ideas exchanged. When the same network is available to anyone, people can contribute without fear of being shut out. For marginalized people (people of color, immigrants, lower- and working-class people), the chance to directly share one's own authentic story or point of view is invaluable. The Internet is a medium where this is possible. All other forms of media have barriers to entry that exceed those on the Internet by orders of magnitude.

Presenting stories in authentic voices is the gift that open networks give to all who have access. Amplifying authentic voices is the role of the community organizer working for positive change. Listening to authentic voices is the role of the policy maker wanting to create responsible regulation & legislation. Open networks make this all possible.

When harm is done to the openness of networks, democracy is endangered. How can openness be harmed? By erecting walls. By locking gates. By segregating participants.

The web is uniquely suited for the spread of stories. The web's openness has changed the defining political issue of this year. During the summer of 2009, America was engaged in a nationwide dialogue about our nation's health care system (a dialogue that continues today). My organization, the [Center for Community Change](#), wanted to make sure that the breadth of the American health care experience was included in the discussion. So we travelled to state and county fairs in Missouri, Maine, Tennessee, Nebraska and Kentucky to interview people about their health care stories. Our "[State Fair Stories](#)" videos were posted online and viewed thousands of times, sharpened the focus of

our advocacy and gave a voice to people who felt left out of the national discourse. We compiled the stories to create a [documentary](#) (embedded below) that we shared with members of Congress and their staffs to showcase how many in rural America feel about the status quo in health care. [We held a Congressional briefing on rural health care issues on the Hill featuring the people who told their authentic stories online.](#) Thanks in part to this video and these people's authentic stories; the concerns of all Americans are being considered in the current debate.

### **Scale**

The success traditional organizing is unquestionable, as visible as the sky is blue. It is exciting to see the ways in which it is evolving for organizers such like me. Open networks and advanced communication platforms enable today's organizers to connect with people in ways their predecessors could never have envisioned:

More individuals are more accessible than ever before thanks to open networks. Ideas can spread like to literally every connected person that is interested. They are visible to them within a few mouse clicks and keystrokes. As such, movements can begin and scale to unprecedented levels. This is especially important to marginalized communities like people of color in the US. Using the power of the Internet, I worked with a [coalition of Black online activists and bloggers](#) to tell the story of 6 boys in Jena, LA who were on the receiving end of unfair criminal sentences following a schoolyard fight. By telling their stories and the stories of their families, we were able to explain our values-based critique of the criminal justice system in a way that empowered interested people all over the world to join our movement. [To raise money, nearly \\$300,000. To send letters, nearly 320,000. Even to attend an old-school rally in defense of these boys \(over 10,000\).](#) A movement like this, driven by people of color, started in the realm of the Internet, and supported by millions of previously unidentifiable and unreachable allies is a testament to the potential of open networks for political engagement. This was possible because the passion was present, the tools were accessible (open & low-cost), and the network was available.

### **Conclusion**

I'll close addressing the next frontier of the Internet, the mobile web. Openness here is critical given the mobile web's personal nature and penetration. The Pew Center notes that people of color in the United States are over-represented in terms of ownership of high-end smartphone devices that can connect to the Internet. Worldwide, there are more mobile phones than personal computers, and the gulf between those numbers will only grow.

Ensuring openness in this next iteration of the Internet is paramount. Existing models are on a collision course with political mobilization. The structure of the mobile market that puts carriers in the driver's seat does implicit and explicit harm to free speech, expression and assembly. There are examples that foreshadow a grim future for political mobilization using mobile technology if the rules are not conscientiously designed and decisively enforced.

Openness must be maintained and protected. It's impact free speech, free expression and free assembly for 21st century citizens is paramount.