

From TV to Twitter



re-tweeting

updating



Today's vegetarian activism is making its mark—and making change—in cyberspace. See how high-technology makes fighting the good fight easier than ever.
By Mark Hawthorne



blogging



networking

tweeting



posting

The'NetWorking

Thanks to Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and interactive websites, online social networking is exploding.



No Farm Sanctuary in your town? Read all about rescues online.



GirlieGirl Army helps stylistas find clothes and animals find homes.



HSUS's top dog keeps the animal-loving community united with his popular blog.

FOR THE MOST PART, JOSH LATHAM SEEMS like a typical vegetarian entrepreneur. He rents a modest beachfront store where he sells clothing he's designed, and this helps fund his campaign to promote the benefits of a plant-based diet. Like most twentysomethings, Latham enjoys a wide variety of music, and his part-time work as a DJ gives him opportunities to mentor people as they go veg. What makes Latham's efforts unusual is that this entire enterprise—everything from the real estate he rents to the clubs where he mixes tunes—exists within a virtual world called Second Life (or "SL"). SL is a fully realized digital environment that allows users to create alter egos who socialize, spend money, and, in Latham's case, even promote vegetarianism. Behind every virtual denizen in SL, however, there is a real, live human sitting in front of a computer screen at home, and these are the people Latham is ultimately influencing. Using the special currency he earns within Second Life, Latham wants to expand his store and create something that will help SL users

Leveling the Field

Of course, Big Ag can't dictate what advocates send through the post office. "Direct mail and other printed media are still popular," says Erica Meier, executive director of Compassion Over Killing, a nonprofit that uses a variety of methods to introduce people to vegetarianism. "People like tangible information—something they can hold—whereas they can delete or dismiss information they find on the internet." Meier believes printed pieces such as vegetarian starter kits are practical because people can refer to them later, or pass them on to a friend. "We are bombarded with requests from people who want to receive information in the mail," she says. "Plus, direct mail increases traffic to our website, which is a key aspect of our outreach."

Yet, unlike social-networking sites, which allow users to nurture connections with people around the globe, a piece of paper doesn't engage the public in any meaningful exchange. Even Web 1.0, with its static home pages, was about as interactive as a mannequin. The

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understand the impact of eating animals. "My goal is to change minds and to get a message across," he says.

From TV to Twitter, the modern veg movement clearly owes a lot to technology. This is most evident online, where vegetarian groups with a limited budget can compete with the deep pockets of agribiz. Joel Bartlett, PETA's online marketing guru, offers one example. "I uploaded our *Meet Your Meat* video onto YouTube three years ago, and it's been viewed more than 215,000 times," he says. "Anyone can upload this video to a website, and that is the meat industry's worst nightmare." Moreover, while netiquette allows showings of graphic documentaries like *Meet Your Meat* (a factory-farm tour narrated by Alec Baldwin and currently being updated), squeamish TV networks often don't. "Even if we could afford it, we couldn't run *Meet Your Meat* on television," Bartlett says, adding that corporate sponsors like Kentucky Fried Chicken sometimes persuade networks not to air pro-veggie commercials.

online world has changed dramatically in recent years, however. "Web 1.0 is really one-way communication: We send out the emails to people and hope that they take action, or we put these stories on our website and hope that people will come," explains Grace Markarian, manager of online communications for the Humane Society of the United States. "But with social networking, you have two-way communication: You put stuff up, people reply, you have a conversation going, and they're also pulling in their friends. It's having people speak back to you."

Not only is today's internet the go-to place to catch up with people, but it's leveled the playing field for all, so someone needn't be with an organization to ride shotgun on the veggie bandwagon. Indeed, it's the 'net's one-to-one spirit that has driven the evolution of Web 2.0 into a true global community in which users can become active participants. Vegans and other animal advocates have thus embraced the internet and its power to propel the cause and reach a wider audience.

When activist Jenna Calabrese co-founded the vegan-advocacy collective Living Opposed to Violence and Exploitation in 2008, she took the whole project online. "We thought the internet would be a great tool to connect people with no limitations on where we live," she says. "We think the content of our virtual space and the physical connections we hope to foster will transcend the need for any office or headquarters."

Byte-Sized Media

The role of virtual space in vegetarian advocacy gets perhaps its hippest spin from Chloé Jo Berman, a self-described "eco vixen" and ethical-fashion expert, beginning with her website, girliegirlarmy.com. Every month the site attracts 300,000 visitors looking for the inside scoop on making green sexy. "We also use sites like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter to promote rescues, fundraisers, and anything else to benefit animal-rights work," she says. In their weekly e-newsletter, Berman and her posse give subscribers the lowdown on couture deals and hot eateries, keeping it cruelty-free by covering mock meats, faux fur, and imitation leather. Berman's secret weapon: fresh content. "I find even re-posting an animal who needs a home on Facebook makes an extraordinary difference."

Naturally, Berman has a blog for posting long commentaries, as do a growing number of veg advocates. Tracy Habenicht started her blog, diggingthroughthedirt.blogspot.com, to counter vegan myths. "I was annoyed at the misinformation that people, including myself, are given about such basic things as what we eat," she says. "So the name of my blog refers to literally digging through the earth to plant healthy, cruelty-free food, and also figuratively to digging through the crap that industry front groups feed the public." Over at passionategreen.net, Sarah Bloom is capitalizing on Twitter, a micro-blogging site that allows users to post short messages, called "tweets," from a computer or cell phone; the tweets are available to readers following that user. "One of the reasons I started PassionateGreen was to inform the public about links and resources available to them on how to go green and the importance of doing so," Bloom says. "Twitter amplified my ability to do that exponentially. I can go about my daily business of blogging and news-site surfing while easily posting the best and most interesting things I find to Twitter.

The information instantly goes out to people who actually want it, and much of it gets 're-tweeted,' which means it goes not only to the people who follow me, but to all the followers of anyone who liked it enough to re-tweet it."

Among the Twitterati is Farm Sanctuary's communications director Tricia Barry, who welcomes input from everyone. "I've got a lot of meat-eating folks connected to us via social networks who find the animals who live at our sanctuaries adorable and want to be updated on animal stories," she says. "When we hit them with an action alert, it's such a great opportunity to educate them. They'll send in alerts about school lunch programs making dairy-free options available, and they're not even dairy-free themselves, but they see the need for that."

A Winning Proposition

Educating meat-eaters was crucial to the success of California's Proposition 2, since most voters are omnivores. So backers of the 2008 ballot initiative to eliminate battery cages for egg-laying hens, gestation crates for pregnant pigs, and veal crates for male calves did more than just dig deep into the high-tech toolbox; they gave the tools to supporters. "We used the same software from Blue State Digital that fueled the Obama campaign, and it gives people who want to get actively involved all the tools they need to organize their own efforts," says HSUS' Jennifer Fearing, manager of the Yes on Prop. 2 campaign. "So instead of having this huge bottleneck called HSUS, where you have to get permission from us, volunteers had all these tools available online. People who

Re-posting and re-tweeting helps homeless animals get maximum exposure.



Wayne's World (WideWeb)

Well before California's Prop. 2 had been assigned a number, Wayne Pacelle was writing about it on his blog, *A Humane Nation*. Pacelle, president and chief executive officer of HSUS, began his blogging in May 2007, and within a few months the signature-gathering phase of Prop. 2 was in full swing. If volunteers were the initiative's backbone, Pacelle was its arms and legs, writing his blog even while crisscrossing the country to explain how the ballot measure also known as the Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act would benefit the lives of about 20 million animals in the Golden State. Not many CEOs devote the time to post a daily blog (he authored 50 posts on Prop. 2—five throughout Election Day), but Pacelle understood the power of his posts, saying, "My blog gave the campaign a platform to provide a detailed and rapid response, which we then pushed out to reporters, editorial writers, endorsing organizations, and volunteers."

The ballot measure was not only a smashing success—more than 8.2 million Californians voted yes on Prop. 2, making it the most popular citizen initiative in the state's history—but it helped demonstrate the internet's political power. Pacelle and his team recognized this power early on, so they made sure the public could play a key role in moving the message. "Given how many members HSUS has in California, the online campaigning offered the prospect of viral marketing, touching millions of voters in California," he says. "We constructed readymade emails that argued the case for Prop. 2 and asked our supporters to forward them to everyone they knew. Through this method, we reached millions of voters. In addition, we used a Flash animation video to great effect, and we put videos online that made the case for Prop. 2. We posted our television advertisements as they appeared and this allowed voters to have a source to get all of the information they needed to vote yes on Prop. 2."



40,100,000

Number of Google hits for "vegetarian"

500+

Number of Facebook groups with "vegan" in their names

160,000

Number of blogs with "vegetarian" in the title

1

Twitter co-founder, Biz Stone, is vegan!

want to get engaged, particularly people in our movement, are very personally invested in this." The Yes on Prop. 2 campaign offered downloadable logos, fact sheets, images, online phone banking, and "My Yes on Prop. 2" pages, so anyone could create events and invite supporters. Signature-gathering forms, donations, videos, bumper stickers, and more could be requested, contributed, forwarded, or ordered from a single website.

The campaign even recruited Fearing's personal Facebook account as one of the official Prop. 2 pages. "Some people don't befriend groups or a cause online," she explains, "and since people were hearing me

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on the radio or reading my name, we wanted them to be able to be able to find me." She linked her Facebook page to a Twitter account so she could constantly update her site from anywhere. "We had a huge group of very active volunteers in California who had such a thirst for information about everything that was going on in the campaign. Social-networking sites provided our über-advocates, county leaders, and others with instant information."


Of course, empowering volunteers and staff was only the first step; the campaign had to show voters that there was a problem with food safety and cruelty, and videos played a major role in that effort. First there was footage taken at the Hallmark Meat Packing plant in Chino, Calif., showing workers violently abusing downer cows and putting them into the food supply. The video, taken by an HSUS investigator using a hidden camera and made public in January 2008, shocked the public and led to the largest beef recall in US history. "That video kick-started the campaign in terms of people realizing there was something bad that needed to change," says Fearing. Then came two undercover videos shot by activists from Mercy For Animals inside separate California egg-production facilities—Gemperle Enterprises and Norco Ranch, the state's largest egg farm. Both videos depict hens living in filthy cages, suffering from open wounds, and being abused by workers. A more user-friendly, animated video was created by Free Range Studios, which also produced *The Meatrix. Uncaged* features a singing pig who explains the cruelties Prop. 2 will ban. The cartoon has been viewed on YouTube more than 200,000 times.

Veg Gen 3

With technology evolving well beyond simple emails to making connections worldwide, the next logical advance is creating lifelike experiences, and we're getting awfully close. The Virtual Battery Cage, for example, the brainchild of web designer Mark Middleton, gives users a 360-degree, bird's-eye view of the cages that imprison egg-laying hens. "I wanted to find a way to show everyone in the world what a battery-cage operation is like, and that meant using the web," he says. "Since I was going to be creating the shed in a 3D environment, it seemed natural to me to view it from the chicken's perspective, not

only because there might be no other way to get this perspective, but because it helps you to empathize with the chicken." Through Middleton's company, animalvisuals.org, he'll be creating more interactive tools—including virtual versions of a gestation crate and veal crate—to educate the public about these cruel confinement devices.

Perhaps the only thing missing from the Virtual Battery Cage is the overwhelming stench of ammonia that assaults one's eyes and lungs upon entering a battery-cage shed, though it seems that technology is not far off. Researchers are perfecting software and hardware applications that will provide smell, taste, and even touch sensations remotely, allowing for fully immersive perceptual experiences. Imagine: cupcake-making demos online, complete with the aroma of cake and the taste of frosting, or an interactive tour that confronts visitors with the sights, sounds, and odors of an industrialized dairy farm.

The next generation of the veg movement is clearly in creative hands with advocates like Josh Latham, who blogs at myvegancookbook.com. His Second Life expansion plans include a virtual pro-vegan ride (think *It's a Small World*, but with broccoli instead of singing dolls). "Will it attract people who need to hear the message? I have no idea," he says. "If nothing else, when someone in SL says to me, 'Being vegan is stupid,' and they try to argue with me about why there are no health benefits, I can send them to the ride." 

Mark Hawthorne blogs about animal activism at strikingattheroots.com.

IsPaperPassé?

With online media becoming the communication tool of choice, what's the future of print? Bright, according to advocates who use both. Vegan Outreach is just one of many nonprofits that engage the public through technology, yet the organization is best known for its face-to-face distribution of leaflets such as *Why Vegan?* and *Guide to Cruelty-Free Eating*. More than 3 million booklets like these have been distributed on college campuses since 2003. Little wonder Vegan Outreach co-founders Matt Ball and Jack Norris believe paper has a place alongside the veg movement's digital toolbox.

"Print is still important for a number of reasons," says Norris. "For one, there are a lot of people who are not reached through any other means; they do not consume a lot of mainstream media and do not know other vegetarians." Norris points out that many people live off the grid and are unlikely to have any tech touch points to receive vegan information. "Secondly, college campuses, concerts, and other venues are very accessible, so we should take advantage of them. Giving someone a booklet allows them to have something to take with them. Many people pass it on to someone else. We often hear from people who say that one booklet changed their own habits as well as a number of their friends."

Ball believes that most people quickly tune out when they feel that a web link or commercial is pro-vegetarian or concerns factory farming. "We're not trying to get people to switch from Coke to Pepsi," he says, "so standard marketing and advertising truisms don't necessarily apply. We're asking people to make real, significant change, and getting that can very often require more information. My experience has been that sound bites and short pieces often don't have the heft to start overcoming people's habits and the peer pressure they feel."

Vegan Outreach isn't completely paper-based. They're online at VeganOutreach.org.