

Rhetorical Strategies of Environmental Cyberactivists

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Environmental organizations fighting to solve the interrelated problems of global warming and climate change, mountaintop removal mining, and deforestation use the Internet rhetorically to motivate citizen action. Such cyberactivism relies on computer-mediated communication and Internet technologies to advance political and social goals (see <http://archive.greenpeace.org/cyberstory/cyberactivism.htm>). As the anti-global warming organization, 350.org, says in its New Media Press Kit, “the technology that will stop the climate crisis isn’t solar panels, it’s the Internet” (www.350.org/sites/all/files/350.org_New_Media_Kit.pdf).

Greenpeace, one of the first environmental organizations to use cyberactivism, pioneered the use of image events or “mind bombs” on its website to call attention to its anti-whaling messages (Deluca 2006, 1-3). Other organizations have followed suit, using image events as arguments based on ethos, logos, and pathos. But various environmental organizations are using other rhetorical techniques as well to persuade people to take action. Through their web sites, these organizations use critical rhetoric to question or denounce “a behavior, policy, societal value, or ideology” and to articulate an alternate policy, vision, or ideology (Cox 2010, 228). On the Internet, rhetorical strategies make use of a variety of visual, audio, and verbal communication, including new media, new technologies, and new relationships with their audiences.

This paper examines the critical rhetoric of four different kinds of environmental websites:

- 1) an organization’s website, represented by Rainforest Action Network (www.ran.org);
- 2) a social movement, open source campaign website represented by 350.org (www.350.org);

- 3) a coalition-mounted, single-issue website, represented by iLoveMountains.org (www.iLoveMountains.org); and

- 4) Hactivist (rogue or parody) websites, represented by: www.americascoalpower.org (launched by Natural Resources Defense Council) and www.coal-is-clean.com and its affiliate site, www.coal-is-dirty.com (launched by the desmog.blog, Greenpeace, USA and Rainforest Action Network).

Comparative impact data from the Internet web information site Alexa provides the worldwide traffic ranks and reputation of the sites studied in this paper, helping to evaluate the audience appeal of various rhetorical strategies. It is my hope that this analysis will be of use to those searching for effective ways to use websites to build public support for addressing pressing environmental issues.

The Rainforest Action Network: RAN.org

The Rainforest Action Network (RAN), founded in 1985, has a mission to campaign “for the forests, their inhabitants and the natural systems that sustain life by transforming the global marketplace through education, grassroots organizing, and non-violent direct action” (<http://www.ran.org/our-mission>). RAN is similar to Greenpeace in that it makes use of symbolic actions to challenge harmful environmental practices. Its web strategy is also similar to Greenpeace, as it uses the web to reinforce and spread its message, and to fundraise.¹ It does not use its website as a forum for exchanges between its members and others.

RAN calls its hallmark “market activism,” which pushes companies “to balance profits with principles, to show that it is possible to do well by doing good” and leverages “public opinion and consumer pressure to turn the public stigma of environmental destruction into a business

nightmare for any American company that refuses to adopt responsible environmental policies" (<http://www.ran.org/about-ran>; see Graydon 2006). RAN's market activism has been successful in helping to convince "dozens of corporations—including Home Depot, Citigroup, Boise Cascade, and Goldman Sachs—to change their practices." RAN claims that it has helped "to protect millions of acres of forests in Canada, Indonesia, Brazil, Chile and beyond" (http://www.coal-is-dirty.com/who_we_are).

RAN's Ethos: Powerful, Rooted in Nature, Radical—and Trustworthy

The Black Panther image, a charismatic megafauna, prominently displayed in its logo and on the top left of its home page, serves as RAN's totem figure, an embodiment of its ethos. While some environmental organizations use charismatic megafauna to tug at the heartstrings of supporters, RAN's charismatic megafauna is portrayed as dangerous, instead of loveable and cute. RAN appropriates the panther's symbolic power and its association with radical action, as in the revolutionary Black Panther Party in the U.S. The image also suggests stealth, power, and an identification with the rain forests, home to the panther. RAN's slogan, "Environmentalism with teeth," superimposed on the back of the black panther, suggests an ethos far stronger than stereotypical anti-environmentalist depictions of "tree-huggers." Immediately to the right of the black panther is a "Take Action" window that seeks to involve viewers in online actions. This Take Action window furthers the action-oriented ethos of RAN, by asking readers to send online letters and sign online petitions.

Despite the radical connotations of its icon, the black panther, a close look at its Board of Directors and the members that it features on its website reveals a solid mainstream leadership and base. RAN's current Board Chair, Jim Gollin, comes from a background in International Management and is a founding member of a socially responsible business organization, Social Venture Network. Gollin says that "Every social change group lies somewhere on the spectrum from radical absolutism that is ideologically pure but can get nothing done, to reformist instrumentalism that can get a lot of fundamentally unim-

portant things done." Gollin says that RAN occupies "a sweet spot, as one of the most radical of the mainstream groups, or one of the most mainstream of the radical groups, depending on how you look at it" (<http://ran.org/jim-gollin>).

One way that RAN builds a credible and trustworthy ethos is by featuring a number of highly educated and middle-class donors, displaying their photos and short bios. One donor, for example, is Josh Pryor, who the website says is a "Recent Cum Laude graduate" who is "environmentally conscious." Another window features a picture of a 100-year-old woman, Eleanor Wasson, who "in one of her last great acts," made RAN "the beneficiary of her 100th birthday presents, helping RAN net over \$12,000" (<http://www.ran.org/donor-profiles>). Displaying images of middle-class donors somewhat tempers the radical connotations of the Black Panther logo.

RAN's Image Events as Arguments

The dominant way that RAN catches the attention of the media and those it wishes to communicate with is through the creative use of image events, or what Robert Hunter, the co-founder of Greenpeace, calls "mind bombs," simple images that "explode in people's minds" to create new awareness. One of Greenpeace's first and classic image event took place on January 1, 1977, when an activist on a tiny Greenpeace rubber boat confronted a Russian whaler in the North Pacific and painted Greenpeace on its bow. Galia Yanoshevsky argues that "Image events are a subcategory of visual arguments." She quotes John Delicath and Kevin Deluca's definition of image events as "'staged acts of protest designed for media dissemination' (315) that have a strong appeal to audiences" and adds that they "foster public discussion by offering fresh, new ways to look at issues at hand by supplying new claims and refutations that fuel debates in the public sphere" (Yanoshevsky, 2009).

Two examples of RAN's image events against Canada's tar-sands oil mining use strong metaphorical images of the death that such mining will bring. In one photograph, RAN protestors lie down, as if dead, with crime-scene

tape draped over them. In another, an activist dressed as a polar bear holds a sign of a devastated landscape that says, “No to Toxic Tar Sands Oil.” Since tar sands oil production

emits far more CO₂ than conventional oil drilling, it will add to the global warming that threatens the survival of polar bears (as well as humans).



Tar Sands oil production, like mountain-top removal mining, is an outgrowth of industrialism, which is an almost unquestioned ideograph, defined by McGee as an “ordinary-language term found in political discourse” that is “a high order abstraction representing commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal” and is hegemonic in its power (McGee 1980, 15, cited in Deluca 2006, 36). Deluca argues that to be effective in challenging such ideographs, an image event needs to foreground at least one antagonism. Antagonisms “make possible the questioning, disarticulating, and rearticulating of a hegemonic discourse” (Deluca 2006, 40).

RAN turned its July 8, 2010 occupation of the Environmental Protection Agency’s headquarters in Washington, D.C. into an image event through a photograph of activists holding a banner across the front entrance to the building. The sign read, “EPA—Easier to Poison Appalachia’s Water than Defy King Coal.” This wording suggests that the Environmental Protection Agency poisons rather than protects as it serves its master, the metaphorical “King Coal.” The antagonisms present in RAN’s image events often evoke strong emotional reactions and serve as arguments based on pathos, or what Aristotle defined as emotional appeals.

350.org: Distributed Political Action

In contrast to Rainforest Action Network’s more centralized approach to communicating with its members through the Internet, 350.org, dedicated to stopping global warming, is modeled on the concept of open source politics and distributed political action. The idea of open source politics that “opens up participation in planning and implementation to the community,” takes as its model open source computer coding: “Steven Johnson, the author of *Emergence*, recently wrote: ‘Using open-source coding as a model, it’s not a stretch to believe the same process could make politics more representative and fair. . . . If the people receiving the message create it, chances are it’s much more likely to stir up passions’” (Sifry, 2004). By encouraging the people viewing a political website to co-create the content of that site, 350.org achieves what McKibben calls distributed political action, which was key to the success of the first computer-based organizing event that led to the founding of 350.org. On April 14, 2007, McKibben and several of his students at Middlebury College began by sending emails to their friends asking them to hold rallies calling for an 80 percent cut in carbon dioxide emissions. They asked these friends to forward the email to their friends, and the idea quickly spread throughout the nation:

We'd told everyone that as soon as their rally was over they should upload pictures to our Web site, and we rented a hall in Washington, inviting all the politicians we could find to come watch the results. By early evening the photos were streaming in. It turned out that we'd 'organized' 1,400 of these rallies in a single day, one of the largest days of grassroots environmental protest since the original Earth Day. We'd had our march on Washington, just in 1,400 different places (McKibben 2010, 208).

By publishing the photos of the demonstrations on the Web, McKibben's group achieved "distributed political action" that "added up to more than the sum of its parts." McKibben recounts a vivid example of the collaborative nature of distributed political action that enabled photographs and video of a demonstration in Ethiopia to be quickly transmitted around the world:

When we heard that there was going to be a 15,000 person march in Ethiopia on October 24 and no one to film the event, our African Media Coordinator based in New York City Skyped a friend in South Africa, who called a friend in Ethiopia, who biked to the event, took photos and videos, then biked to the only high speed internet connection in Addis Ababa, bought a drink at the bar so she could use their internet, uploaded footage to our online media library, and we got it to major news networks 3 hours later.

Many of the demonstrators created striking image events to demonstrate the urgency of taking action, such as a Jacksonville group that suspended a yacht twenty feet above ground to show that when the Greenland icepack "slides into the ocean, . . . that is where the ocean would rise across the country's most expensive real estate" (McKibben 2010: 209).

After James Hansen's NASA report established 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide

"as the maximum atmospheric concentration compatible with maintaining the planet 'on which civilization developed and to which life . . . is adapted,'" McKibben and his students tried to see "if we could make our same tactic—distributed political action—work on a global basis." Their goal "was simply to drive those numbers into hearts and minds around the world. We found other college kids who could translate the message into a dozen languages, and we started writing emails" (McKibben 2010: 209-210). By 2012, 350.org had websites published in 13 languages in 18 countries on six continents.

The mission of 350.org is "to inspire the world to rise to the challenge of the climate crisis – to create a new sense of urgency and possibility for the planet." Articulating its theory of change, the organization says it is "simple": "if an international grassroots movement holds our leaders accountable to the latest climate science, we can start the global transformation we so desperately need." Since its self-defined focus is on the number 350, as in parts per million of carbon dioxide, and getting people around the world to understand the importance of bringing CO₂ levels below that level, the website encourages people throughout the world to create image events related to the number.

In order to reach "the back of beyond" where people often lack access to computers and may not be able to read, 350.org crafted a short animated video to reach people throughout the world, no matter their language. The animation depends on readily recognized icons and pictures to convey the science of 350 parts per million (ppm) of CO₂. It is short enough – one minute, 38 seconds – to be transmitted to and viewed on a mobile phone. McKibben tells the story in his book *Eaarth* about a farmer in Cameroon who saw it on his cell phone, organized his neighbors to plant 350 trees, and sent a picture to 350.org. He says, "our ninety-second animated wordless video looked great on cell phone screens" (McKibben 2010, 210).



The photos posted on 350.org range from pathos-centered to logos-centered image events. One fear-inducing image from Dalian, China, shows students, wearing 350.org shirts, standing on top of their desks, which are piled near the edge of the ocean and lapped by the waves, symbolizing the effects of rising ocean levels on children. Another pathos-centered image shows

three activists hanging a banner on Table Mountain, in South Africa, relabeling it “Table Island” by showing how the waterline in 2065 will be high enough to turn the mountain into an island. This image event also has a fear-inducing edge, with one climber suspended by a rope high above the water in order to hang the banner.



Other image events are more logos centered, focusing more on the number 350, framed by the persons who created a photo display. In one, American soldiers pose by their sand bags,

which have been arranged to spell out 350; in another, young schoolgirls from the Dominican Republic lie in a circle around the number 350.



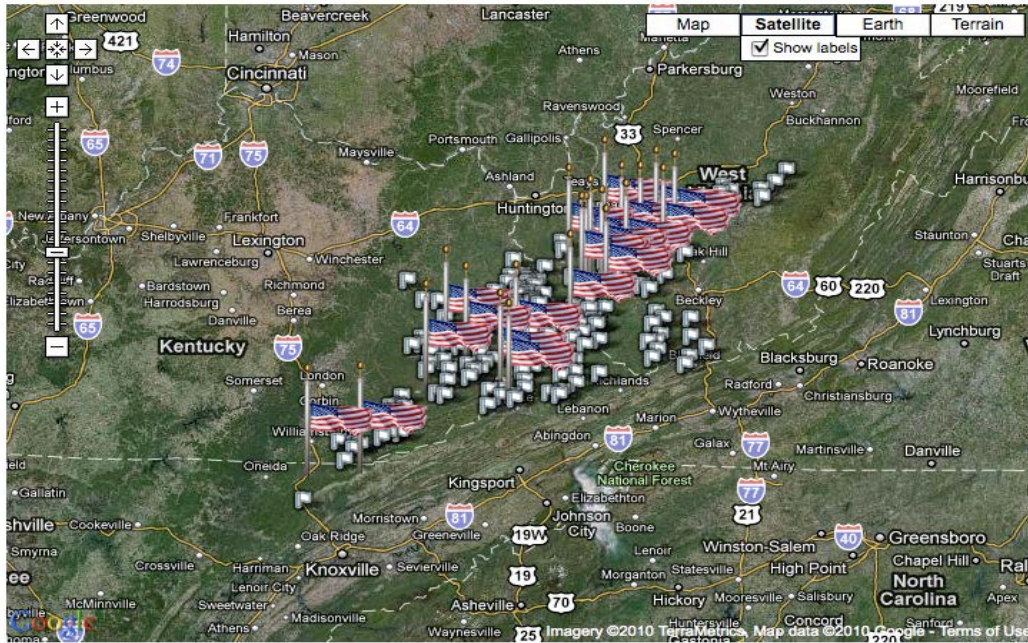
The strategy of distributed political action quickly garnered growth and praise for 350.org. Johann Hari wrote in the *Nation*, “In just a year, the brilliant 350.org has formed a huge network of enthusiastic activists who are demanding our politicians heed the real scientific advice--not the parody of it offered by the impostors. They have to displace the corrupt conservationists as the voice of American environmentalism, fast” (Hari, 2010). The success of 350.org’s open-source, distributed political action is taking cyberactivism to a new level, as it encourages people to go beyond online actions to real demonstrations in their communities.

iLoveMountains.org

Early in 2006, several Appalachian grass-roots organizations, such as Appalachian Voices, Coal River Mountain Watch, Keepers of the Mountains Foundation, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Ohio Valley Environmental

Coalition, Save our Cumberland Mountains, and Southern Mountain Appalachian Stewards, began working collaboratively on a focused website to serve as a platform for information and activism on mountaintop removal mining (MTR). They hired consultant Mathew Gross, who had launched the first Presidential weblog for Howard Dean in 2003 and became Director of Dean’s Internet campaign, to help them make the site innovative and interactive.

The iLoveMountains.org website uses the relatively new technology of Google Earth satellite imagery and mapping to help viewers understand the sheer scope of the destruction caused by mountaintop removal coal mining in Appalachia. By carefully framing their use of these satellite maps through a page called the “National Memorial for the Mountains,” the website creates a series of interactive image events and memorials to some of the more than 500 mountains that have been destroyed.



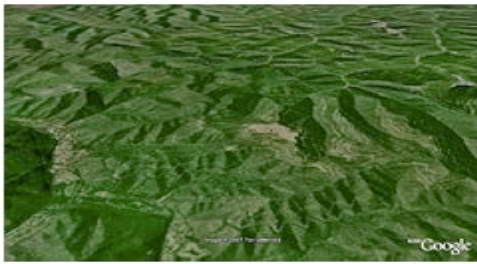
Each flag, at half mast, is located on a map showing where a mountain has been removed. Clicking on the flag brings up the name of the mountain and connects viewers to stories, photos, interviews, and videos of the local residents affected by the mountain's depredation. The flags function metaphorically to transform the mountains into historical sites of struggle and loss. They also help to personify and place value on the mountains—their loss is worthy of a flag at half-mast. Ironically, the coal companies who produce such horrific destruction have created the core images for anti-coal coalitions, captured by Google Earth technology. But the *ilovemountains.org* website creates a powerful social context for interpreting the image through skilled rhetorical framing that uses metaphorical images and language, along with video testimonials from the mountain residents.

Use of Google-Earth's satellite imagery brings into public view the often hidden and

guarded devastation of MTR. The mines' security guards cannot stop these aerial views of the horror that MTR has wrought on the land. The Internet furthers the dissemination of these images. It turns the mountains back into a commons – a virtual commons – where people can freely view the land that has been turned into private property and then destroyed. According to Mary Ann Hitt, Executive Director of Appalachian Voices, "This has revolutionized our thinking. It's given us the ability to give the kind of tour of the mountains that we only could give previously to the media or government officials. This gives an audience of 200 million people" (Olsen, 2007).

Each Mountain Memorial skillfully frames the image events captured by Google-Earth. Here, snapshots of before and after images of Kayford Mountain visually demonstrate what has been lost:

Load image overlay to show Kayford's terrain before mountaintop removal coal mining began.
(Download these images by clicking on the pictures below)



before
(image overlay)

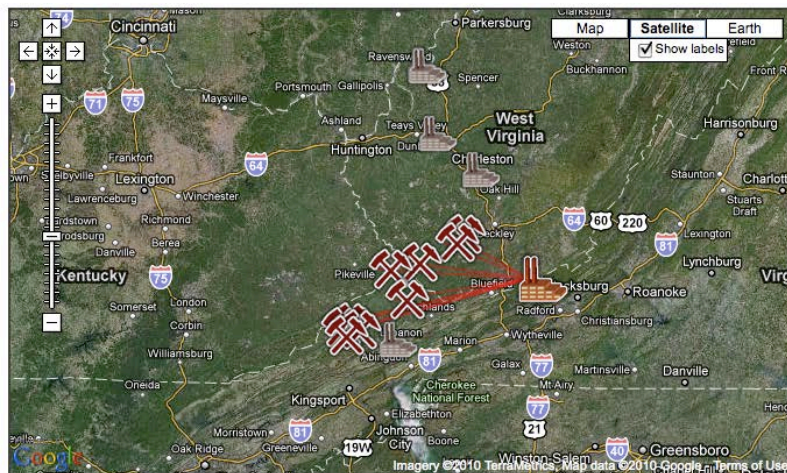


after
(image overlay)

Photos of community events, such as a prayer vigil on Kayford Mountain, inject moral arguments into the issue. The picture also enhances the ethos of iLoveMountains.org, associating the site with mountain people of faith, thus countering pro-coal claims that those who object to MTR are outsiders who are environmental radicals and somehow un-American.

Personalizing Connections to Mountaintop Removal

One way that the website helps to educate and involve viewers is to enable them to track their personal connection to mountaintop removal through a mapping tool that links their electricity provider to any mountaintops that have been removed to obtain the coal. After typing in one's email address, the site produces a map, such as this one:



Mary Farley was sound asleep on the couch when a loud blast went off from the mine above her small house. First, the kitchen wall above the sink separated from the ceiling in a 1-inch crack. Next, the floor dropped 6 inches in one corner. "I thought the house was coming down around me," said. The inspector from the Division of Environmental Protection checked the seismograph records at the mine. He reported that the blasts were all within permitted limits. [Read more.](#)

LEGEND:



The closest power plant on your grid that is connected to mountaintop removal: [Glen Lyn](#), operated by [Appalachian Power Co](#)



Other coal-fired power plants on the [Appalachian Power Co](#) grid that are connected to mountaintop removal



Mountaintop removal mines that are connected to your power grid

NAVIGATION HINTS:

Click any power plant to see how it is connected to mountaintop removal or any mine symbol to get a close-up view of that mine. The controls on the top left of the map allow you to zoom in closer to the ground or back out to get a broader perspective. Even easier, though, is to navigate with the "hand" tool. Clicking and dragging on the map will move the map in the same direction, double-clicking on a point will center the map on that point and zoom you in a little closer, and double clicking with the right mouse button (ctrl-click for macintosh users) to center on a point and zoom out.

According to the web technologist, Benji Burrell, the My Connection tool is the most heavily used part of the site that has been talked about the most (Burrell, 2010).

Like 350.org, iLoveMountains also uses distributed political action through an innovative

challenge to involve bloggers in spreading the word about mountaintop removal mining. The use of networked bloggers to spread its message reflects the influence of their consultant, Mathew Gross.

help spread the word [Share this page](#)

JOIN THE BLOGGER'S CHALLENGE!

* First Name Last Name * Email
 * Zip * Website/Blog (example: myblog.com)

☒ Keep me updated on the effort to end mountaintop removal coal mining

Submit

Take action today by joining the Blogger's Challenge. You'll receive a personalized "Spread the Word" widget for your blog. You'll be able to make a real difference and track your impact on your personalized "Spread the Word" map.

Bloggers "Spreading the Word"

Listed by the number of people who've joined the campaign using a personalized blogger's widget.

ilovemountains.org/news	193
appvoices.org/index.php?frontporch/	53
samsva.org	17
benjiburrell.com	17
anniekatec.blogspot.com	13
hownottosmelltheroses.blogspot.com/	12
coffeemuses.com	7
kharris.wordpress.org	7
havefundogood.blogspot.com/	6
blog.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.ListAll&friendID=174578374	5
myspace.com/dancollinsmusic	5
weloveitdontwe.blogspot.com/	5
wayfaring-wayfaring.blogspot.com	4

Blogger's Challenge Impact Map

Bloggers are making a BIG difference in the campaign to end mountaintop removal - and here's proof. This map shows bloggers in the Blogger's Challenge by zip code who've pledged to help end mountaintop removal through a personalized blogger's widget.

As of January 2012, 3,255 bloggers accepted the challenge to spread the word to help end mountaintop removal and 102,709 persons signed the pledge on the website to end mountaintop removal coal mining. Bloggers can track their impact through a map that shows where their message has been spread. Similarly, those who sign the pledge and send emails to friends asking them to sign, can map their own personal impact.

iLoveMountains.org encourages dialogue on its web pages. It allows people to post comments and to respond to comments about many of its entries. This feature is particularly important in the coalfields of Appalachia, where it is often difficult for people to find a safe space to critique the coal industry and mountaintop re-

moval mining. The site functions as an interactive knowledge commons where people can freely exchange views. To its credit, the website lets the opposing side post on its website. The following interchange between an anti-MTR person and a pro-MTR supporter can be found on the Kayford Mountain Memorial link:

Anti: My god, these people who are coal mining and stripping Kayford Mountain are just plain sick. What is wrong with them? I know that sounds like a lame question, but isn't that what it comes down to? If we do not come together as one and realize we are literally destroying our planet... OUR HOME....we will be destroying ourselves as well ... STOP THE MOUNTAINTOP STRIPPING!!

Pro: What powers your house? It is coal if you are so serious about what you believe [sic] in call the power company and tell them to cut your power off. Why would you want to use more power shut down the web sites cut off your power and go back to living in the 1940s. You don't tell about all the good things that coal brings . . . You continue to do what you think is right and so will I blowing off the tops of mountains providing for my kids and supplying [sic] energy for the nation.


Hactivist or Parody Websites

In contrast to the conventional, straightforward sites of RAN, 350.org, and iLoveMountains.org, hactivist or parody sites are used by some environmental organizations such as The DeSmog Project and its DeSmogBlog and the National Resources Defense Council (in partnership with Greenpeace and RAN) to critique the messages of their opponents in playful, humorous ways. Chadwick defines hactivism as “politically motivated hacking” that “draws upon the resources of the hacker community and hacker culture” (Chadwick 2006, 129).

One of the best known US hactivist groups is The Yes Men, an activist duo consisting of Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno, who use impersonation and parody to raise awareness about social issues. From their offices in Milwaukee, they create and maintain fake websites similar to ones they intend to spoof, which have successfully led to numerous interviews, conference, and TV talk show invitations. Through distributing the free software “Reamweaver” (the name parodies the website building software

“Dreamweaver”), they have made it easy for persons to parody the websites of corporations (<http://kop.kein.org/DIVE/cd/art/reamweav.html>). The Yes Men and RAN have collaborated on several creative campaigns to parody and derail corporate green washing campaigns and expose the environmental consequences of their corporate policies.



An excellent example of an environmental hactivist site is the website americascoalpower.org, mounted by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), one of the largest and most powerful environmental organization in the U.S. Americascoalpower.org is an example of “culture jamming” – taking a powerful cultural institution – in this case, an association of coal power corporations – and turning its rhetoric against itself, by impersonating the voice and look of the association’s discourse. The NRDC parody site mocks the website of AmericasPower.org, sponsored by the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity (ACCCE), a partnership of the industries involved in producing electricity from coal. ACCCE “combines the assets and missions of the Center for Energy and Economic Development (CEED) and Americans for Balanced Energy Choices (ABEC).” AmericasPower.org says that its goal “is to advance the development and deployment of advanced clean coal technologies that will produce electricity with near-zero emissions.” The following screen shots capture first, AmericasPower.org, and then the parody site, americascoalpower.org. Note how well the NRDC parody site reproduces the style of AmericasPower.org with the subtle irony of the slogan and the visual symbol of the electric heater warming up the planet:

AMERICA'S POWER™ 







[Get Involved](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Press Room](#) | [Search](#)






STAY CONNECTED

The Facts | Issues & Policy | Who We Are | FAQs | News

 **CHERYL BRANNAN** “It's what I do out here in the morning that makes that light come on.” 

WATCH NOW >

VIEW THE STORIES OF REAL PEOPLE >  SHANE  CHERYL  WENDY  VENITA  OLIVIA  FRED

 CLEAN COAL RESEARCH  POWER HOUSE  YOUR STATE  PERCUSSION  FACTUALITY TOUR


This site is a project of the Natural Resources Defense Council | [Contact Us](#)

COALPOWER: *Warming America, Warming The Planet*

The Facts | Ask the Experts | News | Who We Are

 Now with more **COAL!** ACCCCCCCC!

COAL: IT'S A SMALL PRICE TO PAY ...TODAY



TECHNOLOGY CAN TAKE US TO CLEAN

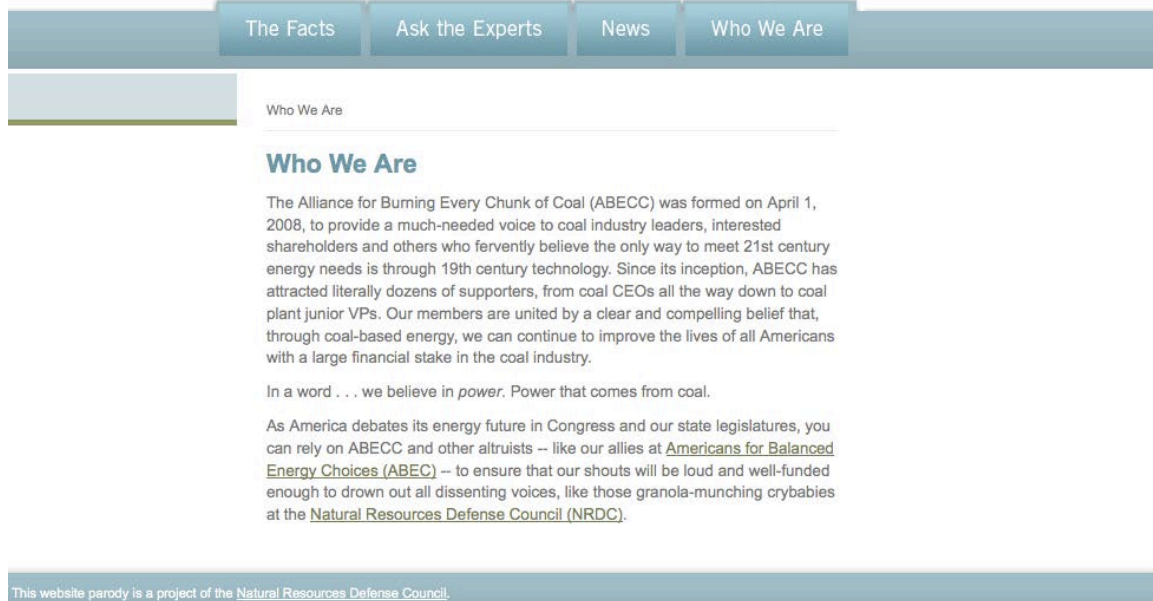
AND 95% OF POWER PLANT SULFUR DIOXIDE EMISSIONS

[NEWS](#) | [BLOG: DON'T PULL THE PLUG](#)

Parody, hactivist sites create what I call an “alter-ethos” for the organizations who create them. Thus, the NRDC, one of the oldest and largest environmental organizations in the U.S, borrows the playful, creative, and avant-garde ethos of hactivists like the Yes-Men, as it simul-

taneously mocks the ABEC (Americans for Balanced Energy Choices) by renaming it the ABECC, or “The Alliance for Burning Every Chunk of Coal” and reflects on how it thinks anti-environmentalists see the NRDC—as “granola-munching crybabies.”

COALPOWER: *Warming America, Warming The Planet*



This playful and edgy ethos contrasts with the serious ethos of the NRDC's main website, www.nrdc.org, and adds a creative and youthful dimension to the NRDC.

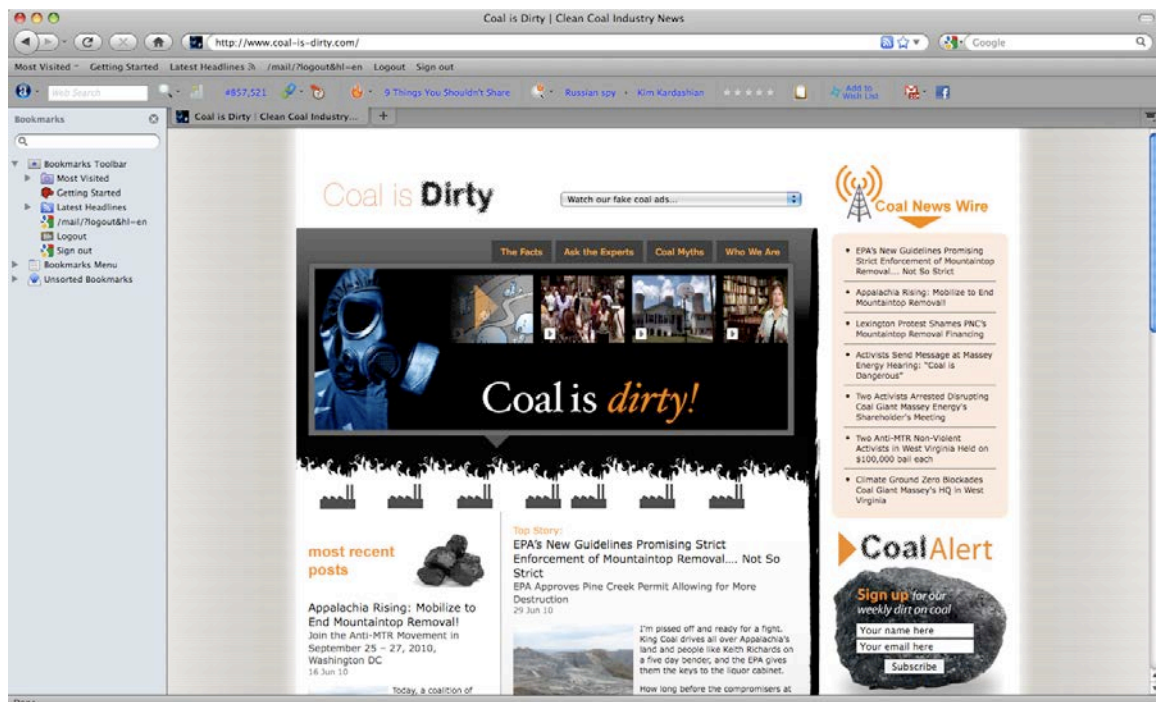
Another parody/hactivist website, Coal-is-Clean.org and its affiliate site, Coal-is-Dirty.org, was created by The DeSmog Project (see the DeSmogBlog.com) in partnership with RAN and Greenpeace, to expose the lies behind the clean coal campaign by the coal power industry and "debunk the myth of clean coal." Led by Jim

Hoggan, founder of James Hoggan & Associates, a leading Canadian public relations firm, the DeSmog Project and DeSmogBlog exist "to clear the PR pollution that is clouding the science on climate change." I discovered Coal-is-Dirty by accident. Dismayed by the oxymoron, "clean coal," I typed in coal is dirty into Google, and to my delight, discovered this site. Rather than mocking a specific website, coal-is-clean.com creates a kind of archetypal fake website full of the kinds of rhetoric and patriotic symbols used by the coal power industry:



But, clicking on any one of the links on this site automatically takes you to the affiliate web-

site, Coal-is-Dirty.com, which exposes the facts about coal.



Coal-Is-Dirty provides an activism kit to encourage people to fight against coal by dispelling the public relations myths about coal in their hometowns.

Conclusion

This comparison of various environmental websites reveals both shared and divergent approaches to convey the organizations' ethos and goals. RAN, 350.org, and iLoveMountains make use of a variety of linked social networks. RAN and 350.org have their own YouTube and Flickr sites as well. RAN has special pages for kids, teachers and youth, and iLoveMountains has

special resources for teachers. iLoveMountains and 350.org make space for viewer comments on their websites.

One useful way of assessing the success of websites is to track their global traffic ranking and reputation (through the number of sites linking in) through the data provided by a leading web analytics firm, Alexa.com. The following chart shows the worldwide traffic rank and the number of sites linking in to each of the websites for July 2010 and May 2012. In worldwide traffic ranking data, the lower the number, the greater the viewership for a site. Note that in 2010, Alexa reported no data for the parody sites.

Websites	Worldwide Traffic Rank	Reputation (Sites Linked In)	Online Since
RAN.org July 2010 May 2012	115,743 101,742	1,968 5,616	December 1994
350.org July 2010 May 2012	90,566 86,268	2,873 6,527	2007
iLoveMountains.org July 2010 May 2012	762,724 1,449,240	371 791	September 2006
Americascoalpower.org May 2012	10,192,672	10	2008
Coal-is-clean.com May 2012	8,170,418	28	2008
Coal-is-dirty.com May 2012	1,573,643	224	2008

In comparing traffic rankings, it is significant that the newest website, 350.org, has the highest worldwide traffic rank and the highest number of sites linked in. Since the site is published in 13 different languages and has offices in numerous countries, it has a greater opportunity of reaching a larger and more diverse audience. The organization's strategy of distributed political action campaigns is a way of not only building a social movement, but simultaneously attracting new viewers to the website. These new viewers can point with pride to the photographs of their demonstrations that they have published on the 350.org website.

In comparison to 350.org and iLoveMountains, RAN's website is less interactive and open. Its image events reinforce its ethos of "environmentalism with teeth" by containing numerous antagonisms to hegemonic institutions and discourse and more pathos. RAN's use of hactivist websites and actions contributes to its aggressive ethos. The image events of 350.org tend to be logos-centered and reinforce the phrase used in its animation about itself: "Because the World needs to know." When I first encountered 350.org and its logos-based mission of explaining the importance of 350 ppm of carbon dioxide to the world, I was skeptical that

it would gain much of an audience. But, its repeated mass public actions involving grassroots communities in displaying their understanding of global warming and its consequences has steadily increased viewership (see its Campaign Recap for 2010 and 2011 under Campaigns & Projects on its website). Its most recent “Connect the Dots” campaign on Climate Impacts Day, May 5, 2012, along with the accompanying Climate.Dots.org platform, where people may submit their stories of how climate change is impacting their communities, continue to capture media attention and new participants. On April 6, 2011, 350.org joined forces with the 1Sky, an environmental education and lobbying platform supported by over 600 environmental organizations, into the New 350.org. While both groups had worked together on campaigns since their inception, the formal merger brought a much stronger domestic campaign to 350.org and a much stronger connection to the international climate movement to 1Sky. The traffic ranking of 350.org has grown considerably, and so has the number of Twitter followers. After its October 24, 2009 International Day of Climate Action campaign, which organized 5,245 events in 181 countries, 350.org had 10,000 Twitter followers (Rowder 2009); by May 2012, it had over 94,600 Twitter followers.

While iLoveMountains.org’s traffic ranking fell over a two-year period, its reputation grew, with over double the sites linking in. The single-issue focus of iLoveMountains.org, as well as its regional focus on Appalachia, may limit its audience reach. Nevertheless, the site creates a kind of knowledge commons and free space for discourse about mountaintop removal mining that is particularly important in coalfield communities, where criticizing coal mining can have negative repercussions. Its use of Google Earth’s satellite imagery coupled with sophisticated framing techniques to create image events, performs a kind of rhetorical jujitsu on the coal mining companies, using images of their own destruction of the environment against them. The site is highly interactive, through its tool to search personal connections to mountain top removal, and it en-

courages social networking through its blogger’s challenge.

The hactivist or parody websites create an “alter ethos” – witty, youthful, sharp, and edgy – for the Rainforest Action Network, Natural Resources Defense Council, and DeSmog.blog. These sites “culture jam” the discourse of their opponents through irony and sarcasm. Significantly, Coal-is-Dirty.com has a much higher traffic ranking than its affiliate, Coal-is-Clean.com (1,573,643 to 8,170,418, respectively), and many more sites linking in (224 compared to 28, respectively). The greater audience for Coal-is-Dirty.com suggests that the counter-narrative to the coal companies “clean coal” campaign has greater currency.

This analysis finds evidence of successful collaboration among environmental organizations, as in the efforts by RAN, Greenpeace, and The DeSmog Project to mount the parody sites, the collaborative effort of organizations that created iLoveMountains.org, and the recent merger of 1Sky with 350.org. More cross-pollination of rhetorical and technological strategies would be beneficial to environmental cyberactivism. RAN could borrow iLoveMountain’s use of Google Earth mapping to show the scope of rainforest deforestation, and 350.org could also use Google Earth to help connect the dots of climate change impacts, mapping receding shorelines, advancing deserts, and areas of drought, flooding, or increased, intense storms.

All of the sites could have space for comments and dialogue following new stories. Expanded audiences for environmental messages could be achieved by copying 350.org’s new media concept of less-is-more, as demonstrated by its effective short animation that is viewable on cell phones and which communicates through icons without language, even to those who can’t read. More studies of the rhetoric of environmental websites will prove useful in developing better communication strategies to mobilize citizen support for addressing environmental problems.

Notes

1. Greenpeace encourages viewers to become a "one minute activist." One image on its website of a person using a computer has this caption: "Our global community of Greenpeace activists hail from 125 countries and territories. We have a long list of victories to prove that when we speak with one voice, we can change the world. Sign up and you'll get a monthly E-zine and action alerts full of ways you can be a one-minute activist. It's all free" (<https://secured.greenpeace.org/seasia/ph/getinvolved/sign-up/>). Yet this form of cyberactivism, which Mario Diani calls the "Reinforcement perspective of cyberactivism," reinforces preexisting organizational structures. Diani argues that Greenpeace and other professional protest movements use cyberactivism largely to reinforce its organizational structure of "a core of full-time employees funded by a largely passive membership base." Diani goes on to argue that "Greenpeace's activity mainly centers upon attention-grabbing symbolic demonstrations that are carried out by a relatively small number of dedicated individuals" (Diani 2000, 386-401, from Chadwick, 134). According to Chadwick, Greenpeace uses the Internet to: "communicate with its membership as well as to distribute in-depth material relating to its various campaigns . . . its website does not function as a place for online discussion and deliberation for its membership." Chadwick argues that "the fostering of a strong identity among its supporters is secondary to the goal of achieving tight integration at the center backed by mass-membership funding" (2006, 134). For another point of view, see the perspective of a Greenpeace cyberactivist who later became a full-time employee of Greenpeace (JulietteH 2010); and Greenpeace's "Cyberactivism revolutionizes Greenpeace campaigns."
2. For more on the concept of a knowledge commons, see Puckett, Fine, et al., 2012.

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