THE POWER OF NONPROFIT ONLINE ADVOCACY TO CATALYZE SOCIAL CHANGE:
A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Historically nonprofit organizations in the U.S. have played a critical role in representing the political and legal interests of marginalized groups. They take on some of the biggest and most complex challenges with the expectation from funders to spend as little as possible. For smaller under-funded nonprofits with limited staff, not having capacity to use technology effectively, is a serious disadvantage in an already lobsided competition with billion-dollar private foundations. In today’s digital world online advocacy can be a valuable tool for nonprofits to disseminate and correct misinformation, to mobilize and empower citizens into taking action such as getting out the vote, lobbying, and applying pressure on government officials. There is much at stake right now for nonprofits to play a pivotal role in safeguarding the changes that took decades of advocacy and lobbying to accomplish in the U.S. The Internet after all, contrary to popular belief, originated from a small group of intrepid nonprofits who built the first global Non-Governmental Organization electronic network. This research explores the external factors that contribute to a 501c3 nonprofit’s ability to catalyze social change by using online advocacy. It reviews two advocacy campaigns and offers several important lessons for nonprofit organizations wishing to become more effective policy advocates: 1) Both MoveOn and ProPublica are able to empower citizen lobbying at the grassroots level; 2) Both nonprofit organizations leverage online media advocacy in unique ways to shape news coverage; and 3) they use online media to open innovative modes of communications to direct and sustain on-going engagement with stakeholders to expand political representation.

Advised by Karin Orr, M.A.
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Abbreviations & Terms

**501c3 organization:** a specific tax designation defined under U.S. tax law for nonprofit organizations that are exempt from federal income tax. In order to qualify under section 501c3, an organization must be organized and operated exclusively for exempt purposes (e.g., charitable, educational, religious, scientific, sports, public safety, or prevention of cruelty to children or animals) and none of its earnings may inure to any private shareholder or individual.

**501c4 organization:** a specific tax designation defined under U.S. tax law for an organization that operates exclusively to promote social welfare. A 501c4 organization is allowed to lobby as its primary activity and may engage in some political activities, so long as that is not its primary activity, without jeopardizing its exempt status. The earnings of a 501c4 organization may not inure to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual.

**Chronic resource starvation cycle:** a cycle that fuels the persistent underfunding and underreporting of overhead costs in the nonprofit sector.

**Clicktivism:** the practice of supporting a political or social cause via the internet by using social media or online petitions, typically characterized as oversimplifying complex issues involving little effort or commitment.

**CBP:** U.S. Customs and Border Protection

**DHS:** Department of Homeland Security

**DHHS:** Department of Health and Human Services

**Earned media:** refers to publicity or exposure gained from methods other than paid advertising.

**Electronic government:** the shift of government services and information delivery to online and digital platforms

**Institutional Isomorphism:** when an organization creates a model that innovates within a given field with proven results and other organizations follow to adopt their model.
**IC:** Invisible Children

**Lobbying:** refers to specific efforts to change or influence public policy and one mechanism is through grassroots or direct lobbying efforts such as political representation, political mobilization, and political education.

**MADD:** Mothers Against Drunk Driving

**Media advocacy:** is defined as the strategic use of mass media and community organizing as a means to advance social or public policy.

**NCLA:** National Council of La Raza

**Nonprofit advocacy:** is broadly defined as the attempt or means to influence stakeholders to effect change of public policy, either directly, or indirectly.

**NPHSOs:** Nonprofit human service organizations

**Online advocacy:** within the context of this research refers to using digital technology and mass media to contact, inform, mobilize a group of concerned people around an issue or cause.

**Organizational digital divide:** describes the condition where organizations do not have the capacity or do not utilize technology effectively.

**Private Foundation:** a type of nonprofit that is established with a large donation that serves an endowment that would enable the organization to sustain with investments in perpetuity.

**Public Foundation:** a type of nonprofit that relies on fundraising from the public, such as through government grants and individual donors.

**RD theory:** Resource dependency theory looks at the relationship organizations have with their environment and examines organizational behavior due to dependence on funders.

**White Savior Industrial Complex:** a term coined by Teju Cole for a pattern in white non-white people’s agency is displaced.
Chapter 1: Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Nonprofits take on some of the biggest and most complex challenges from extreme poverty to public health and education inequities and with the expectation from funders to spend as little as possible, with little to no investment in their organizational structure, referred to as the nonprofit resource starvation cycle.¹ The Internet has been heralded as the “Great Equalizer” as a means for nonprofits to harness its potential to address complex social problems. In fact, the first global person-to-person communication network was pioneered by a small band of nonprofits in the 1980s for the purposes of informing and empowering groups working for social justice activism.²,³ However, the Internet’s genuine ability as a “Great Equalizer” remains a subject of debate. Literature suggests that the benefits of the internet are overstated. Some scholars reason that due to the chronic resource starvation cycle, nonprofits are at a disadvantage because to leverage what the Internet can offer would require more financial and human resources. The gap between organizations that are “wired,” which means they have resources to access and use the Internet effectively, and those that do not, is referred to as the organizational digital divide.⁴ For smaller under-funded nonprofits with limited staff, the digital divide is a serious disadvantage for advocacy purposes because without access to technology and the human resources to use technology effectively, they are less able to participate in political structures that have adopted

¹ The nonprofit resource starvation cycle refers to a cycle that fuels the persistent underfunding and underreporting of overhead costs in the nonprofit sector (Gregory & Howard, 2009).
³ While the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is credited with funding universities to create a computer network in the 1960s that evolved into email networks in the 1970s, that system was not open to the public.
new advocacy technology (e.g., electronic government, online rule making, and wired legislatures).

Historically nonprofit organizations in the U.S. have played a critical role in advancing the well-being of their beneficiaries by representing the political and legal interests of marginalized groups, such as women, under-represented minorities, and low-income communities, among many others. The role of nonprofits is a unique, essential, and countervailing force to the public and private sectors, and because nonprofits work directly with people at the community level, they are positioned to represent diverse values and advance issues in the public’s interests. Nonprofits accomplish all of this with limited funds: 92% of nonprofits operate with budgets less than $1 million a year, and for all their work, 88% spend less than $500,000 annually. Nonprofits are supposed to respond to the failures of government and the market, and some scholars have posited that the role of the third sector can be the site for collective action, “places where individuals come together to identify shared priorities and mobilize for communal welfare.” Nonprofits are driven by mission and have been a valuable pillar of democracy and civic engagement, often on very small budgets and with limited peoplepower. However, their influence in public policy is now under question given the dual competing forces of billionaire foundations and the impact of the Internet. Literature shows

that there is a growing consensus that nonprofit public charities play an important role in the policy process by representing the interests of vulnerable and marginalized communities. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), for example, a 501c4, is recognized for its work defending the public interest and protecting civil liberties of all people in the U.S. For over 100 years, the ACLU has pursued legislative cases to fight government infringement on individual rights, championing especially for equality on behalf of groups who have traditionally been denied their rights (e.g., 1925 Scopes Trial challenging a ban on the teaching of evolution, 1954 Brown v. Board of Education that ended racial segregation in public schools, 1973 Roe v. Wade advocated for a woman’s right to abortion, among many others).12 Another example, the advocacy work of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), a 501c3 victim services organization, has led to public policies and prevention measures to protect families from drunk driving, drugged driving, and underaged drinking. MADD’s advocacy work has helped state legislatures to address state drunk-driving problems, resulting in the reduction of drunk driving deaths by half, over 379,000 lives have been saved.13,14 UnidosUS, formerly National Council of La Raza (NCLA), a 501c3 social rights nonprofit founded in 1968, has since grown into the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. With an affiliate network of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the US, UnidosUS conducts research and advocacy by providing a Latinx perspective on issues such as advancing economic, civil rights, immigration, health, education policies for the Latinx community.15

12 https://www.aclu.org/about/aclu-history
14 Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) website: https://www.charities.org/charities/mothers-against-drunk-driving-madd
15 Unidosus.org/about/history/
With the growing popularity of the Internet in the early 2000s, new and emerging trends of online nonprofit advocacy began to emerge. The 1990s Internet era ushered in optimism with the promise of it being a “Great Equalizer” that would erase prejudices of in-person communications, but as Wolf (1998) observes, the absence of certain groups and the cost barriers of getting online are often overlooked and only highlight the limitations of IT and more work is still needed towards equality in telecommunications.  

As electronic government, defined as the shift of government services and information delivery to online and digital platforms, matures to involve more governmental functions and grow more advanced, organizations that are less tech savvy will be disadvantaged. The online process of creating regulations, for example, “creates an uneven playing field” for stakeholders who are less tech savvy, and groups that are unable to use technology effectively will have a “significantly reduced voice in the regulatory arena.” McNutt (2008) suggests that to achieve a level playing field, organizations will need technological competency. The consequences are serious for organizations that are not “wired” and cannot participate, less able to conduct critical activities for their organization, leaving some degree of their power to advocate untapped. In this digital age, “if one group has access and another does not, new technology presents a barrier to political participation.” McNutt opines that the problem is critical for organizations that are involved in advocacy, policy making, and activism, and advocacy organizations are also the ones with the most to gain from technology. Technology can improve nonprofit operations on many levels from resource management to communications and event coordination. Online media advocacy also referred to as online advocacy is a widely used practice that offers a myriad of tools that are used by interest groups large and small and by

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18 Ibid, 2-3.
being comparatively lower cost can give smaller nonprofits a competitive advantage if they can use it effectively.\textsuperscript{19}

A few early imperfect examples of internet use for nonprofit advocacy purposes have brought to light its potential impact. Most notably, is the KONY 2012 Campaign, launched by Invisible Children (IC), an often-cited example of how a tiny, relatively unknown nonprofit used the Internet to launch a viral video campaign that mobilized a grass-roots youth movement to impact U.S. international policy and fundraised millions of dollars. Originally intended as an “experiment” to raise awareness on the atrocities committed by the “obscure” Uganda war criminal, Joseph Kony, the video racked up over 100 million viewers, making Internet history as the most watched video at the time. Within weeks, the viral success of the KONY 2012 video pressured U.S. Senators from all parties to act.\textsuperscript{20,21} However, without a lead organization with the capacity to channel the campaign’s online media success into long-term solutions, the movement dwindled, ultimately unable to sustain engagement, and by 2014, IC announced that most of the staff would cease working, handing over their Africa-based programs to local partners.\textsuperscript{22}

Resource dependency (RD) theory argues that the relationship organizations have with their environment and organizational behavior are driven by dependence on an external entity,


donor, or funder. Despite IC’s modest resources, $3.1M budget and 14 employees, they were able to get the attention of U.S. Senators who introduced resolutions to condemn Kony, sent U.S. military advisers to aid Ugandan forces to track down the rebel leader. Alternatively, the campaign lost steam quickly without delivering real, sustainable changes for the people of Uganda because human resource capacities and organizational structure were not in place to organize at the national and international levels. As Cohen opines, the way the Internet is used to propel the KONY 2012 video is not the same way Arab Spring protesters or Occupy Wall street activists used online advocacy. IC used a “click-and-send-your money approach” that doesn’t carry the same heft as “going into the streets.” Shortly after the video release, a counter-narrative emerged. Ugandans took issue with the video’s portrayal of them as helpless victims who needed rescuing. Using the narrative of a white protagonist from the Global North championing the “natives’ development” in the Global South is symptomatic of what Teju Cole calls the *White Savior Industrial Complex*, a pattern in which non-white people’s agency is displaced, their power denied.

IC’s advocacy came from a position of power and privilege, given it is based in the U.S. and not in Uganda, its access to information technology knowledge, news media attention, and resources from public donations. Narrative control portends power and the individual or entity that can shape storytelling holds a great deal of power and influence. The imbalance of power is

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24 Invisible Children’s total revenue in 2005 was $3.1 million and by 2012 was $4.9 million. Retrieved November 30, 2021 from: https://www.guidestar.org/profile/54-2164338
28 White Savior Industrial Complex, coined by Teju Cole, refers to a critique of a white figure who is seen as rescuing non-white people, a pattern in which non-white people are denied agency and seen as recipients of white benevolence.
an unresolved challenge within the nonprofit sector and the role of power in relationships (e.g., client and nonprofit, donor or sponsor and nonprofit, and between nonprofits) is an important and understudied area.²⁹

In an era of severe inequality where U.S. wealth is concentrated among a handful of families, the 0.00001%, and billionaire philanthropists continue to funnel money into private foundations to protect their wealth, illustrating the systemic imbalance of power and privilege within the nonprofit sector, another dimension of power to examine closely. The forces that shape access to wealth, resources and political influence not only impact an organization’s ability to conduct their mission but also cascades onto advocating and amplifying the needs of groups they represent.³⁰

This research looks at the power imbalances within the nonprofit sector as well as the broader social inequalities in American politics using power and privilege theory with careful examination on the role of the Internet and the examination of its potential as an equalizing force. Events such as the Arab Spring, a series of anti-government protests that spread with the aid of the internet across much of the Arab region in the 2010s, and the various Occupy movements are reminders that social and political movements can emerge and spread rapidly with the use of online advocacy.

While the nonprofit sector has grown exponentially over the past 60 years, many nonprofits since the 1960s have made inroads in developing public policies and advancing the interests of under-represented and vulnerable groups. In fact, there is widespread research that claims that in order for nonprofit organizations to continue to be successful in the policymaking

process, they must strengthen their organizational resources while also building collaborations with other organizations in both the nonprofit and public sectors. Collaborations have clear end-goal benefits such as improving service delivery and also leveraging resources and shared knowledge to increase organizational sustainability and survival. Scholars suggest that acquiring resources, such as leveraging new technology can have significant benefits to expand the capacity of nonprofit’s political advocacy as well as maximize their fundraising efforts.

Problem Statement

Barriers to engaging in political advocacy take many shapes and forms for 501c3 charitable nonprofits in the U.S. Donaldson’s (2007) study finds that when advocacy is not integrally part of an organization’s mission, the barrier it poses is as strong as not having adequate resources. Under RD theory, a risk to the organization is goal displacement when the nonprofit adapts behavior and changes activities in order to satisfy an external entity, donor, or funder. RD studies show that since nonprofits are dependent on external sources of funding (e.g., government, private, or public) for their existence, they tend to be reluctant to engage in advocacy for fear of losing funding. For example, if a nonprofit’s activity is perceived as favoring a certain political party, a funder could withdraw funding, or threaten to, if they do not approve of the politics. In the U.S. two party system, nonprofits will want to maintain neutrality so as to not turn away potential donors. Another challenge posed by RD is that the policy making

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process can take years and may not align with donor’s short-term plans.\textsuperscript{36} Contrary to nonprofits’ fear of losing donor support if they engage in political advocacy and lobbying, research by Nicholson-Crotty (2011) finds that organizations that report policy activity receive more donations in the following fiscal year, with some variation across the types of service.\textsuperscript{37} Organizational characteristics such as size, maturity, financial support networks, and accessibility of information technology systems can all impact an organization’s advocacy activities.\textsuperscript{38} It is not surprising that there is a direct positive relationship between size of organizational budget and advocacy participation, thus, nonprofits with less resources are less likely to be able to hire staff and have the capacity to be involved in broader activities and motivation to advocate.\textsuperscript{39} However, a counter point to RD theory is that when nonprofits leverage technology, they can use low-cost but effective communications tools for advocacy purposes. There is some research that finds that nonprofits with technological capacity are more likely to engage in advocacy activities. Therefore, online advocacy techniques offer smaller nonprofits cost savings in communications, compared to direct mail and television advertisement, and the ability to expand their geographical reach\textsuperscript{40,41}

The imbalance of power and privilege is rarely mentioned but is an unresolved challenge within the nonprofit sector, one that disadvantages leaner and external resource dependent


nonprofits. Multi-billion-dollar private foundations have access to wealth and wealthy networks to fund their advocacy work while smaller nonprofit organizations have a much more difficult time raising funds to support advocacy work. Smaller nonprofits must invest resources to raise funds such as through a designated staff person, research assessment trips, or consultants, etc. While smaller nonprofits are often in lopsided positions of power and privilege that may never change, the Internet, arguably has the potential to help nonprofit organizations engage supporters and influence public policy, such as using online advocacy to communicate, interact, and mobilize current and new stakeholders to act and engage in petitions and other citizen lobbying tactics.

Therefore, the question that this research seeks to answer is what external factors contribute to a 501c3 nonprofit organization’s ability to catalyze social change through the use of online advocacy? By social change, this research refers to a wide range of activities encompassing, but not limited to: a) raising the public’s and government’s awareness of issues; b) disseminating and correcting misinformation; c) changing the public’s and key decision-makers’ behavior; d) mobilizing citizen lobbying and applying pressure on government officials; and e) influencing legislative reform. This research includes a review of two nonprofit advocacy campaigns and analyzes whether using online advocacy impacts the organization’s ability to influence public policy.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The root of the word advocacy is *advocare* meaning “coming to someone’s aid.” Other definitions of the word include support for the individual, causes, and seeking to change policies, laws, practices, and attitudes. There is a body of research that rests upon the notion that nonprofit organizations intrinsically have advocacy-based missions that set the course for their activities and services to create social value and advance the public good. Nonprofit advocacy is broadly defined as, “the attempt to influence public policy, either directly, or indirectly” while in major nonprofit classification systems, nonprofit advocacy work is narrowly defined as “the protection of rights and promotion of political interests.” Regardless of their primary missions, most 501c3 nonprofits engage in some form of advocacy work, be it research, public education or civic participation, by raising awareness and informing policy makers and government representatives on issues.

Lobbying is only one tool in the advocacy toolbox. One of the tools in the political advocacy toolbox is for nonprofit organizations to undertake lobbying activities to influence legislation. Lobbying is defined as specific efforts to change or influence public policy and one mechanism is through grassroots or direct lobbying efforts such as political representation, political mobilization, and political education. Scholars reason that since nonprofit lobbying can give voice and amplify the needs of underserved and underprivileged groups, nonprofit organizations therefore, play a crucial role in American policymaking. One body of research gives evidence to how nonprofit organizations can influence policy by linking communities to

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political campaigns with some success.⁴⁹ Although to what extent nonprofits lobby can vary widely depending on factors such as organizational type, characteristics, resources, and capacities.⁵⁰

The literature points to the inadequacy of the current classification system and the data challenges scholars face: how to generalize from political activity, such as lobbying, to many varied types of political activity that are not typically measured, and how to estimate the extent of political activity when nonprofits often do not recognize their political activities or define political activities in different, inconsistent ways.⁵¹ Some scholars propose an expansion of the category to include civic participation organizations.⁵²

In an attempt to broaden the definition of advocacy, some scholars have argued a line of research that conceptualizes foundations as interest groups that are inherently involved in the political system and have the power to influence government. Like interest groups, foundations, have the option to engage in activities that can influence public policy and in fact have strong political clout because of their access to money and wealthy elites. As the number of foundations rise and assets continue to grow, they can be political actors that can influence government, endorse, and implement policy changes and reforms.⁵³,⁵⁴

The difference between a private foundation and public charity is distinguished by the level of public support in their activities. Under U.S. tax law, a 501c3 organization is presumed a

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private foundation unless it qualifies for a determination as a public charity.\textsuperscript{55} Public charities receive more financial support from the general public or governmental agencies and have greater interaction with the public. A private foundation, on the other hand, is less open to public scrutiny, and is typically governed by a small group of individuals or family members, receiving the majority of funding from a small number of sources and investment income.\textsuperscript{56} The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) recognizes nearly 30 types of nonprofits as 501(c) organizations and according to Foundation Center data (2018) there are 970,883 501c3 nonprofits large enough to register with the federal government. This figure does not count churches, foundations, and nonprofits too small to register (i.e., organizations with less than $5,000 in gross receipts are not required to register with the IRS, though many do anyway). \textsuperscript{57} The IRS Code is dense and complicated to navigate, and not all tax-exempt organizations are required to file their Form 990, such as a church or church-affiliated organization, schools below college level operated by a religious order, among others.\textsuperscript{58} Therefore, the actual number of nonprofit entities is much higher than the data currently being reported and collected.\textsuperscript{59} If the actual number of nonprofits were accounted for, in theory, there would be enormous potential for nonprofits to engage in advocacy and the public policy making process. According to the U.S. tax code records, only about 1%-2% of 501c3 nonprofit organizations engage in tax code-defined lobbying activities but when policy


\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.


advocacy is examined more broadly, research suggest that participation rates are closer to 50% in certain geographic areas.\textsuperscript{60,61}

The nonprofit sector has undergone exponential growth over the past 50 years. The number of nonprofit organizations registered with the IRS has increased 4.5\% from 1.48 million to 1.54 million from 2006 to 2016.\textsuperscript{62} Research indicates that nonprofit growth can be attributed to a downward reduction on government provisioning of public goods and services.\textsuperscript{63} While there is an increase in the rate at which nonprofits are engaging in advocacy activities, the absolute number of nonprofits engaging in advocacy remains low, and research suggests that those organizations that do participate in advocacy, do so in a limited capacity and intermittently.\textsuperscript{64,65}

Research also show that nonprofit leaders are reluctant to engage in the policy process or political activities due to several factors, mainly: a lack of understanding or misconception of legal advocacy activities, fears (perceived or real) of losing tax exempt status; possible loss of neutrality; and being deemed “too political.”\textsuperscript{66,67} Berry (2005) points out that the very IRS system that regulates nonprofits, also discourages them from getting involved in civic engagement. For example, using the word “lobbying” can be a loaded word and the implications can affect how nonprofits view advocacy participation. Many nonprofit leaders shy away from using the word to describe their organization’s activities for fear of losing IRS tax exempt status.

\textsuperscript{66} Salamon, Geller, and Lorentz, 2008; Roy, A. 2004. “Book Review: Jeffrey M. Berry and David F. Arons, A Voice for Nonprofits”
Only half of nonprofit leaders know that they can lobby even if they receive some government funding. The policy making process can distort public participation, and “disenfranchise the most disadvantaged in society.” A line of research looks at the role of nonprofits in advocacy and how nonprofits can play a pivotal role in building healthy civic engagement and democracy. From a social science perspective, civic engagement is highly valued for a democratic society. Therefore, it is important to study, not only the extent of nonprofit engagement in the policy process and political advocacy, but also the decision-making process nonprofits consider on whether or not to engage in advocacy as well as how they navigate certain barriers.

Salamon et. al (2008) conducted a national survey of NPOs in different fields and found that the most cited reasons NPOs do not get involved in advocacy included lack of staff, staff skills, and time. To the contrary, Suarez et. al (2018) found evidence to support that foundations can have a direct impact on advocacy initiatives such as through their grantmaking, through which they can steer nonprofit organizations in strategic directions, and also by directly pursuing policy reform. Educational policy reforms, for example, has been the object of large private foundations philanthropy. The adoption of the Common Core State Standards and the widespread, rapid growth of charter schools are attributed to investments from the Gates Foundation, Dell Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation, among others. Suarez et al. trace the origins of the expectation that foundations are politically neutral and have limited scope

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and engagement in advocacy to the Tax Reform Act of 1969 which set the regulatory reforms that prohibit private foundation lobbying, “establishing a formal constraint that conventional interest groups and citizen groups do not face.” More recent studies have shown that foundations are becoming more involved in policy advocacy and large private foundations proactively pursue a policy agenda. Suarez et. al also highlight a gap in the literature where much of the current research on foundation’s advocacy focus on private institutions (e.g., independent, family, operating, and corporate foundations) and on case studies of single foundations or groups of foundations in a particular issue area, but little attention has been given to identify which types of philanthropic organizations are most likely to engage in advocacy as an organizational strategy to support their mission.

Another criticism of the current state of research on advocacy organizations is that most studies focus on organizations whose mission and core activity is advocacy which, Almog-Bar & Schmid (2014) argue, only represents a small percentage of nonprofits. Child & Gronbjerg (2014) finds that about 23% of nonprofit survey respondents said that they promoted positions on certain policy issues. Since most nonprofits combine advocacy with services, where service delivery is their main goal, advocacy has become an “inherent responsibility” for nonprofits, particularly Nonprofit Human Service Organizations (NPHSOs) who represent their clients where their mandates are to “[enhance] human and social rights” and “protect and advance the

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well-being of [their] clients.” Sarmiento Mellinger (2017) brings an organizational perspective to the research on NPHSOs by emphasizing advocacy’s core value as a practice strategy within the social work field to advance their goals of “social and economic justice, defend[ing] human rights, and champion[ing] the causes of the disadvantaged and oppressed individuals.” Similar research also contributes to establishing the value of advocacy as a strategy that can benefit nonprofits in myriad ways such as to have a say in financial and budget allocations, regulations, and service delivery for constituents. Therefore, it is important to expand understanding of advocacy as a practice and its application within nonprofit organizations and how nonprofits’ adaption of technology can help them expand their political advocacy activities.

Gaps in data collection, weaknesses in IRS classifications, and misconceptions of legal advocacy activities limits fully understanding the dimensions of nonprofit advocacy. As Sarmiento Mellinger (2017) points out researching and understanding advocacy is challenging in how it is interpreted and integrated into an organization’s overall structure and strategy is not always fully understood. Additionally, factors such as limitations of time and money, lack of know-how, federal regulations, (mis)understanding of the IRS Code, and fear of repercussions to their organization’s tax-exempt status, reputation, and funding, are among the myriad of barriers 501c3 organizations face to engage in advocacy activities in the first place.

Nonprofit advocacy strategy is defined as a long-term and broad objective whereas a tactic is defined as a specific action to implement a strategy. Nonprofit advocacy work can be

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categorized in many ways, and one such way is through an inside the system and outside the system framework. An insider approach can mean working through legislative and judicial lobbying, engaging with administrative government agencies, providing technical expertise on an issue to elected representatives while an outsider strategy can take the form of education campaigns, mass media coverage, protests, demonstrations and organizing events.

The extent to which foundations engage in advocacy has been a long debate. Studies of private foundations suggest that their role has been rather limited in scope and conservative in approach\(^\text{82}\) where they lend support to well-established causes as followers rather than as leaders of social movements, and they tend to steer support away from controversy.\(^\text{83}\) Historically, foundations tend to shy away from engaging in social change or direct advocacy activity.\(^\text{84}\) This pattern of reluctance can be traced to the Tax Reform Act of 1969 which set the regulatory reforms prohibiting private foundations from lobbying.\(^\text{85}\) When foundations steer clear of influencing specific legislation, they have a wide berth to promote social agendas. Recent research finds an uptick in foundations undertaking advocacy work. Private independent foundations, particularly a few very large private foundations, are proactively pursuing a policy agenda (e.g., Gates Foundation, Board Foundation, and Carnegie Corporation promotion of Common Core; Walton Family Foundation, Dell Foundation and Board Foundation support of the rapid growth of the charter-school movement; and Zuckerberg and Chan who are among prominent living philanthropists known to be hands-on in directing their grant-making

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\(^{84}\) Ibid.

\(^{85}\) Ibid.
Research shows that ideologically conservative foundations have become more assertive about funding think tanks that promote their shared values.\(^{87}\) The emergence of tech billionaires also translates an entrepreneurial ethos into an explosion of foundations being established by a new generation of philanthropists, called venture philanthropy or philanthrocapitalism, eager to influence the regulatory environment.\(^{88}\) These trends illustrate how foundations are acting more like interest groups where advocacy has been integrated into the organizational strategy and mission.

Private foundations that are supported by prominent wealthy philanthropists (e.g., Zuckerberg and Chan, the Gates, the Waltons, etc.) are political actors who can produce social change through their grantmaking processes and by supporting policy reform directly.\(^{90}\) There are currently more than 86,000 foundations in the U.S. with assets above $865 billion with the power to disburse approximately $60 billion per year in grantmaking power.\(^{91}\) Mega private foundations backed by affluent benefactors, can take public positions on policy with political clout because of their access to money and wealthy elites. In some instances, when the foundation’s patron is a living philanthropist, prominent individuals such as Bill Gates, George Soros, and Zuckerberg and Chan, they can steer the work of the foundation to align with their advocacy and policy shaping efforts.\(^{92}\) The number of foundations are increasing, up 28% from 2004 to 2018, and their assets continue to skyrocket.\(^{93}\) There are four main types of foundations

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\(^{89}\) The concept of interest groups originates form David Truman’s work on group theory (1951) that asserts that interest groups form in response to common interest among individuals experiencing some form of hardship such as economic or political disturbances, prompting group members to interact and become more aware of their shared interests (Walker, 1983, 390).


and the primary IRS classification difference among them is whether they are private or public based on financial support (see figure 1). A private foundation is established with a large donation that serves as an endowment that would enable the organization to sustain with investments in perpetuity. Public foundations rely on fundraising from the public, such as through government grants and individual donors.  

There are many dimensions of nonprofit advocacy where organizations engage at different levels and types of advocacy. Some do not engage at all, many participate in some form of advocacy in an ancillary way, and a small minority devotes a substantial amount of resources to advocacy work. Much of the literature on nonprofit advocacy focuses on public charities, large service organizations at the national or international policy level, national level, or those that promote public or special interests. The research also focuses on the smaller proportion of nonprofits that devote a huge amount of resources to advocacy and overlooks the other larger majority of peripheral advocacy nonprofits. A study of statewide nonprofit advocacy activity finds that a substantial proportion of nonprofits that participate in advocacy do so in an ancillary manner, not as their main activity, and do not devote any or much resources to it.

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Studies suggest that nonprofits’ proximity with constituent populations provides them with expertise on public policy issues.\textsuperscript{99}

When nonprofits engage in political advocacy such as lobbying, they do so within IRS regulations. Under U.S. tax law, 501c3 nonprofits can engage in lobbying as long as they report expenditures by using the substantial part test or by selecting the 501(h) election. The 1976 law, called the H election provides nonprofits with the ability to lobby without fear of an IRS audit, yet according to research only 2% of the close to a million nonprofits elect to exercise this option.\textsuperscript{100,101}

The imbalance of power and privilege is a persistent challenge within the nonprofit sector where smaller nonprofits are competing for policy influence against wealthy private foundations. Reckhow (2016) describes the myriad ways that the top 15 educational foundations poured $56 million within a 10 year period (2000 to 2010) to directly influence education policy: 1) by funding national advocacy grants, 2) coordinating efforts across groups at state to federal levels that share the same strategic goals, 3) forming public-private partnerships to support national-level policy advocacy and research.\textsuperscript{102} While billion-dollar private foundations have wealth and access to wealthy networks to fund their advocacy work such as having dedicated staff or contracting lobbyists, and therefore more easily influence policy, smaller nonprofits put forth tremendous efforts to compete (e.g., tapping into diverse networks of stakeholders, building trust and legitimacy within the communities they serve, and fundraising for advocacy work which no easy feat to secure donor to support). To manage these power differentials, smaller nonprofits

draw on a collection of tools to promote causes including lobbying, community organizing, creating campaigns for political candidates, referenda and recall petitions, among others. A recent body of research explores the Internet’s possibilities to help nonprofit organizations to engage supporters, influence public policy, and more specifically, use online advocacy as an outlet to expand nonprofits’ capacity to communicate, interact, and mobilize with current and new stakeholders to take action.

Theoretical Framework

A central component of this research is to use resource dependency (RD) theory as a framework through which to examine the external factors that contribute to a 501c3 nonprofit organization’s ability to catalyze social change through the use of online advocacy. Next a comparison of advocacy campaigns is conducted to further examine the advocacy tactics employed and their effectiveness at influencing public policy. Drawing upon Guo and Saxton’s (2010) typology of advocacy tactics, this research will analyze each campaign to examine how each organization utilizes advocacy tactics which include, “research, media advocacy, direct lobbying, grassroots lobbying, public events and direct action, judicial advocacy, public education, coalition building, administrative lobbying, voter registration and education, and expert testimony.”

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105 Resource dependency theory looks at the relationship organizations have with their environment and examines organizational behavior due to dependence on funders. Under resource dependency theory, a risk to the organization is goal displacement where the nonprofit adapts behavior and changes activities in order to satisfy an external entity, donor, or funder (Clear & Holloway, 2018, 860).

For smaller nonprofits, the imbalance of power and privilege is a lived reality where the playing field is uneven. McNutt describes how powerful groups have “the money, connections, and access” at their disposal making it a challenge for smaller nonprofits to compete. 107 As the industrial society moves into the new information economy, many of the long-held advocacy tools (e.g., community organizing, referenda and recall petitions, holding demonstrations and protests) are also changing. This situation is especially challenging for small under-resourced organizations. The Internet did not live up to its promise as a “Great Equalizer” and scandals such as the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica, where millions of users’ data was collected without their knowledge or consent and used for political advertising, reveal the darker side of World Wide Web. In order to leverage the values of what the information age has to offer, nonprofits must have the financial and human resources to use technology effectively. Research recognizes that there is a digital divide for individuals, as well as organizations, when technology is not used effectively or when the capacity does not exist.108,109 Compared to private and public sector organizations, nonprofits are often perceived by researchers as “technologically backward.” Research argues that this is due in large part to the chronic resource starvation cycle where smaller, under-funded nonprofit organizations, do not have the capacity to adapt and keep up with new technology.110

The debate over the effectiveness of using online advocacy as a tool for changing public policy abounds. On the one hand, some scholars see online media as the “Great Equalizer” between the wealthy and poor, which if used effectively, can mobilize collective action at the

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grassroots level. On the other hand, scholars suggest that the benefits of online advocacy are overstated, arguing that online advocacy fails to actually mobilize supporters, resulting in “clicktivism” or “slacktivism.”

Invisible Children’s KONY 2012 video, for example, is cited as a cautionary tale on the perils of clicktivism, oversimplifying complex political issues and reinforcing the fickle nature of clicktivism. Some scholars even argue that online media is simply a new tool for the continued dominance of those already with power and influence.

Both sides of the debate rely on resource dependency (RD) theory to frame their claims. For scholars who regard social media’s ubiquity and transparency as democratizing and empowering, online advocacy can be used to mobilize grassroots social movements. Organizations can use online media for advocacy work with little staff time investment. The Internet and online advocacy tools have lowered the barrier to entry by reducing the costs of advocacy.

Organizations can use online platforms like Twitter to call out government and political leaders (@JoeBiden) to bring attention to issues and mobilize followers to contact legislators through Facebook groups. For scholars on the other side of the debate, online advocacy is considered a “weapon of the weak,” an outside strategy that provides a form of indirect contact to key decision makers. While online media tools may be low cost, to use them effectively for advocacy purposes requires considerable investment of staff, time, expertise, and resources. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) find that staff expertise and resources are crucial determinants of online advocacy use, and organizations with more staff tend to use more online advocacy tools.

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112 Clicktivism or slacktivism refers to the tendency for people to click on a web page to engage in social action but then do nothing more (Cohen, 2012).
Chapter 3: Methodology

To answer the research question, of what external factors contribute to a nonprofit organization’s ability to influence public policy through the use of online advocacy, this research will conduct a comparative analysis of two case studies. These case studies are of two advocacy campaigns launched by two different mid-size U.S.-based nonprofits. This research will identify each of the advocacy tactics used, drawing on Guo and Saxton’s (2010) typology of advocacy tactics (e.g., research, media advocacy, direct lobbying, grassroots lobbying, public events and direct action, judicial advocacy, public education, coalition building, administrative lobbying, voter registration and education, and expert testimony), as well as assess their utility, relative to the effectiveness of the advocacy campaign, which will be defined as a significant influence on public policy. This research aims to identify best practices in relation to nonprofits effective use of online advocacy tools while examining external factors that may have influenced this success, ultimately extracting best practices and lessons learned for other mid-size U.S. based nonprofits who want to become better advocates for their stakeholders and themselves.

To study two nonprofit online advocacy campaigns and evaluate the effectiveness of the campaigns, this research will use a qualitative case study analysis. Case studies can offer this research a method to explore conceptual validity by identifying and measuring variables that are difficult to quantify, such as power, advocacy effectiveness, and impact. Compared with statistical studies, case studies allow for conceptual refinements with a high level of validity over...
a smaller number of cases and have additional advantages in the identification of new variables and hypotheses. 117,118

Resource Dependency Theory

This research methodology was selected to compare two advocacy campaign examples launched by nonprofits of similar size, despite resource limitations, that were able to leverage online advocacy tools effectively to impact public policy and social change. This methodology also allows for analysis using resource dependency theory and alternative theories of advocacy effectiveness to understand what impact using online media tools has made on nonprofit advocacy campaigns. In this research, impact will specifically be defined as its success in raising the public’s and government’s awareness of issues, disseminating and correcting misinformation, changing the public’s and key decision-makers’ behavior, mobilizing citizen lobbying and applying pressure on government officials, and influencing public policy. To this end, this research will examine two campaigns—MoveOn’s anti-war and invasion of Iraq campaign that built and mobilized communities online and on the ground to seek earned media to frame issues, and ProPublica’s use of personal narratives to humanize reporting on the Zero-Tolerance policy to shape public opinion and compel political leaders to reform legislation.

Defining Public Policy

Public policy in this research refers to nonprofit participation in a wide range of activities beyond the scope of legislative lobbying, as defined by the IRS code. Nonprofit participation in the policy process involves not only Guo and Saxton’s (2010) typology of advocacy tactics but can

also encompass conducting and disseminating research, raising public awareness, and educating about issues, organizing, and mobilizing people, sharing expertise, and giving testimony to inform government officials about regulations, meeting informally with elected officials, representing individuals and groups before the court, organizing debate forums and get out the vote campaigns. This research will refer to most of the above to encompass public policy aspects that deals mainly with raising awareness about issues, organizing, citizen lobbying, and policy reform.

*Measures of Advocacy Effectiveness and Impact*

This research is further analyzed with a discussion of how to measure the effectiveness and impact of nonprofit advocacy. Therefore, this research will look at external factors that could have also influenced the advocacy campaigns’ success. Advocacy effectiveness is multidimensional, to study effectiveness requires assessing multiple indicators and accepting there is no single cause. Recent research proposes that effectiveness can be identified by patterns, constellations of multiple conditions.\(^\text{119}\) According to R.J. Tofel’s research on the impact of nonprofit journalism, for an online news publisher, measures of success for print journalism such as circulation and advertising sales numbers are no longer relevant or sufficient. Tofel offers an alternative measure of impact within the context of explanatory and investigative journalism where the goal is to reveal something that someone with power seeks to keep a secret.\(^\text{120}\) Charting engagement with readers—the intensity of a response to a story and the extent to which it catalyzes action or interaction is a critical measure of impact. Equally important is the type of

\(^{120}\) Tofel, R.J. (2012). Non-Profit Journalism Issues Around Impact: A White Paper From ProPublica:  
audience, not just audience size, that is reached, the readers who feel empowered to act and the key decision-makers with the power to change things.\textsuperscript{121}

Overall, this research attempts to incorporate three broad approaches of effectiveness: 1) an external facing approach looks at relationships with other actors (e.g., constituents, government, other nonprofits); 2) the political context or policy landscape; and 3) a strategic approach looks at the impact of advocacy tactics or strategies on policy outcomes.\textsuperscript{122,123}

To characterize each nonprofit’s advocacy behavior—organizational structure and characteristics, revenue streams, and a specific advocacy campaign—this research relies on, though not limited to, the following data sources: the organization’s website, annual reports, organizational profiles on Candid, as well as other secondary journal articles, published case studies, newspaper articles and editorials.

\section*{Chapter 4: Data and Discussion}

This research will compare and analyze two advocacy campaigns organized by two mid-size nonprofit organizations founded during the vanguard of the Internet popularity. In addition to being founded eight years apart (1999 and 2007), and less than 25 years ago, both MoveOn’s and ProPublica’s staff size is approximately less than 150 employees. While both organizations are funded by a combination of public and private donations, MoveOn Civic Action also relies on public donations and grants (See figure 2 summary of organizational characteristics).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Summary of Organizational Characteristics}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Organization Name & Nonprofit Type & Average Gross Receipts & Zapp Org Size Categories & Year Founded & Longevity & Staff Size & Funding Source(s) \\
\hline
MoveOn Civic Action & Nonprofit & $10M$ & Medium & 1999 & 16 & 150 & Public & Private \hline
ProPublica & Media & $2M$ & Small & 2007 & 13 & 150 & Public & Private \hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(2017-2019)</th>
<th></th>
<th>1999</th>
<th>22</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
<th>Public donations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MoveOn Education Fund</td>
<td>$213,576</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public donations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501c3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public donations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoveOn Civic Action</td>
<td>$10,999,981</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Grants, public donations, public &amp;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501c4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>private foundations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProPublica</td>
<td>$36,502,285</td>
<td>Medium-Large</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501c3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Public and private foundations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Form 990 filings 2017-2019; [https://front.moveon.org/2020-gift-disclosure/](https://front.moveon.org/2020-gift-disclosure/)

Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) explain that staff expertise and resources are crucial determinants of online media use, and organizations with more staff tend to use more online media tools.\(^{124}\) While there’s evidence that MoveOn and ProPublica invest serious time and resources to get their messages across new and social media channels, however, given that each organization employs fewer than 150 staff to cover the geographical expanse of the entire U.S. on a wide range of topics and issue areas, the correlation between more staff and using more online advocacy tools doesn’t quite hold true by these two examples. Contrary to RD theory that says nonprofits are reluctant to engage in advocacy when they are dependent on external sources of funding such as government grants and contracts for their existence, in fear of losing funding, MoveOn and ProPublica actively engage in advocacy and lobbying activities.\(^{125}\) In the case of MoveOn, having a 501c4 social welfare tax-exempt designation alongside a 501c3 enables it to lobby as its primary activity without jeopardizing exempt status and to also accept public donations and direct some of the funds towards political activities.

**Case Study #1: MoveOn.org**


MoveOn situates itself “at the forefront of innovating new ways digital tech can empower ordinary people from all walks of life to make their voices heard,” making it an ideal case study of online advocacy and its ability to influence policy and social change. MoveOn came about as a result of the Clinton impeachment debate and petition, dubbed “the first breakout digital intervention in American politics,” which at the time was unprecedented for an online petition to transform the national political conversation. Established as an online grassroots organization in 1999 by two tech entrepreneurs, comprising of MoveOn Civic Action and MoveOn Education Fund, MoveOn is able to channel all of its resources specifically into digital activism.

**Organizational Mission and Structure**

MoveOn Education Fund, as a 501c3 public foundation, directs its mission on investing in organizational partnerships, developing community building opportunities, and sustaining organizing on campaigns that reflect MoveOn priorities. As a 501c4 organization that is able to lobby as its primary activity and may engage in some political activities to promote social welfare, MoveOn Civic Action’s mission focuses on nonpartisan advocacy and education, providing tools to the public to engage in civics, and developing grassroots leaders of progressive movements. MoveOn bills itself as a progressive political organization, without mentioning associations with liberalism or a particular political party, even though most of the candidates they support are Democrats. Maintaining political neutrality is an important positioning tactic with dual purposes: 1) to manage its organizational identity, and 2) to attract support and donations from individuals of all political affiliations.

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130 Ibid.
The 501c4 designation also enables MoveOn to mobilize donations for congressional and presidential candidates. For example, the disapproval ratings of then President Bush’s handling of the Iraq War along with enthusiasm for Democratic candidates, Clinton and Obama, helped funnel donations to Democratic and Progressive candidates.\textsuperscript{131} For Obama’s campaign, MoveOn members donated over $88 million and registered 500,000 young voters.\textsuperscript{132}

\textit{Background & Historical Context}

After the September 11th attacks and during the lead up to the war in Iraq, MoveOn mobilized a massive number of supporters and funding in protest to the Iraq invasion. MoveOn’s online advocacy campaign employs direct actions (e.g., letter writing, engaging public officials and politicians, and holding public and virtual events such as a Virtual March on Washington in 2003 which attracted 37,000 attendees), media advocacy, and fundraising large sums of money quickly through small donations.

\textit{Measuring MoveOn’s Advocacy Effectiveness}

\textit{Defining Impact in Nonprofit Advocacy}

In nonprofit advocacy, impact and success are difficult to define because it is hard to establish direct causal linkages between advocacy campaign goals and outcomes. Oftentimes many groups are simultaneously working on common issues. Some scholars focus on direct/insider advocacy strategies, political outcomes such as policy changes and electoral votes as signs of success\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{131} Eaton, M. A. (2011). From the seats to the streets: MoveOn. org and the mobilization of online progressive activists (Doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder), 179.
while other researchers claim that indirect/outsider strategies in the form of shaping issues through the news media can also be a measure of advocacy success. 134

**MoveOn’s Advocacy Strategies and Tactics**

*Indirect Strategy: Convenient Online Activism*

MoveOn provides a flexible, opt-in model for quick and convenient online activism, a “one-stop shop” to inform and educate concerned but busy citizens to lobby and engage in politics. Similar to fast food, MoveOn’s advocacy model is well suited for consumerist appetites accustomed to the instant gratification of the digital age.135 The convenience of online activism is especially salient for individuals with disabilities, the elderly, and others for whom it is difficult to participate at in-person events, and especially now during a pandemic. MoveOn uses *viral marketing* to encourage individuals located anywhere to share petitions, calls to action, and donation drives to friends and family giving everyone a shared outlet for their activism. MoveOn’s low threshold for participation advocacy model gives rise to a huge membership pool which can lobby politicians and legislators at the local and national level.

*Indirect Strategy: Online Grassroots Community Building*

The convenience of the Internet also allows MoveOn to develop online communities and to serve as a venue for people to act upon their values and connect with people who share their values.136 Many of MoveOn members Eaton interviewed say that they felt like activists and even those who were no longer actively participating as volunteers or staff still felt like activists long after


136 Ibid, 120.
being involved in a particular campaign.\textsuperscript{137} All of these advocacy tactics combined enables MoveOn to interact with more and newer supporters, expanding political and civic engagement.

\textit{Indirect Advocacy Strategy: Online Communications}

Early on MoveOn realized the importance of using online tools for more than communications but as the glue that holds together an online organization. As one interviewee describes: “you have to show back out to all those people who feel like they’re doing that in isolation that they’re not, that it’s collective action. And that inspires them to do more and get more people to do it.”\textsuperscript{138} MoveOn uses email and online communications tools such as blogs, discussion forums, and online rating systems to raise issues, gauge interests, prioritize ideas, develop action plans (e.g., requests to lobby government officials and online petitions) to rally members to invest time, money, and effort to participate in forms of mobilization that impacts offline activities as much as online activities. Members are encouraged to write letters to newspaper editors, make phone calls to political leaders, write postcards to voters, and organizing events in their communities, among other activities. Through these set of tactics MoveOn is able exert direct influence on legislation on two levels: 1) by deploying “citizen lobbying,” and 2) by helping to elect progressive congressional and presidential candidates.\textsuperscript{139} Eaton’s analysis of MoveOn’s action requests and outcomes of issues and election results finds a 50/50 record of success/failures. Eaton is quick to point out that this is a rather “respectable” record considering that MoveOn depended on an online community for citizen action and limited resources, compared with insider deals and professional lobbyists, tactics often associated with wealthy

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid, 122.
\textsuperscript{138} Eaton, M. A. (2011). From the seats to the streets: MoveOn.org and the mobilization of online progressive activists (Doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder), 194.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid, 172.
private foundations. This success rate trends with research on political organizations and social movements that are able to influence public policy no more than 50% of the time.

**Indirect Advocacy Strategy: Earned Media**

In an email dated August 15, 2006, MoveOn asked members to send letters to the editors criticizing Bush’s handling of the Iraq war to all levels of media markets from small, mid-sized, to national newspapers. In conjunction with the letters to the editors, members are also strongly encouraged to insert personal narratives into pre-packaged talking points and share their commentary online either as blog posts, emails and letters to elected officials, or submitting letters to newspapers. One of MoveOn’s social media strategies is to invest heavily in training active members to create *earned media*. A tactical example is sending *astroturf letters*, which are identical letter templates, to newspaper editors with the goal of shaping public opinion on a given issue. Although some newspapers and researchers regard *astroturf letters* as “plagiarized participation,” MoveOn sees the letters as a “legitimate expression of political opinions of people” who are otherwise too busy to participate.

To get the media’s attention, MoveOn leaders would identify a media hook, such as planning simultaneous vigils on the anniversaries of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and then promote the actions on social media to drum up supporters online and in-person. MoveOn would then invite local news outlets to cover the event, creating *earned media*. The impact of this strategy are multi-fold, it activates citizen lobbying to build pressure and the appearance of public

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140 Ibid, 174.
143 Ibid, 188.
144 Ibid, 159.
concern for a particular issue and can compel elected officials to read this as the will of the people and thereby taking action to represent the public’s interest.

*Integrating Indirect and Direct Advocacy Strategies*

MoveOn consistently plans opportunities for members to participate in online and offline grassroots activism. As a virtual organization with no national headquarters or physical location, staff work across the country from home and only 10-20% of members participate in offline activism, building a sense of community is a high priority to MoveOn’s overall strategy. With the growing importance of online communities, MoveOn relies on a system of bi-directional communications (e.g., emails, blog, discussion forum, and online rating system) with its members to generate ideas and strategies to mobilize an online community.\(^{145}\) Moreover, leaders define organizational boundaries of an activist community by using email messaging to frame organizational goals in terms of us versus them to manufacture an “in-group identity.”\(^{146}\) The low cost and speed of digital tools such as emails, blogs and online rating facilitate frequent communications in which MoveOn uses to diffuse ideas, organize actions, and signal to members that they are part of a large, coordinated network of powerful community activists, instead of being lone actors clicking away on their computers.\(^{147}\) This type of messaging appeals to *individual efficacy* and convinces members that by signing a petition or making a phone call, they could change a legislation or an election outcome.\(^{148}\) Collectively, these advocacy tactics—using “us versus them” framing, developing in-group identification, and convincing members to

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\(^{147}\) MoveOn’s membership was at 500,000 in 1998 around its founding, by mid-2003 membership reached 1.7 million and by the end of 2004 was at 2.8 million.

see themselves as part of a larger collective effort—result in building an idea of a massive grassroots community “out there” online.\textsuperscript{149}

In the early days of the Internet era amidst technological uncertainty and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, political mobilization seemed urgent to Americans of all political stripes, and MoveOn was able to demonstrate that its online and offline advocacy model can produce tangible (indirect and direct) outcomes. MoveOn “pioneered the field of digital organizing, innovating a vast array of tactics that are now commonplace in advocacy and elections, and shifting power toward real people and away from Washington insiders and special interests.”\textsuperscript{150}

\textbf{Case Study #2: ProPublica}

With the growth of cable news and political blogs, vlogs (not to mention the amplification through social media channels such as Twitter, FaceBook, and RSS feeds) the news sources are becoming more explicitly political, and as Eaton explains, “these sources are functioning much like social movement organizations by providing interpretation of events that support their ideological positions.”\textsuperscript{151} The next case study, ProPublica, serves as the ideal case study to examine the role of online advocacy by way of news media, an often-understudied area.

The ProPublica report by Ginger Thompson published on June 18, 2018, based on leaked audio recordings, would become the pivotal point during the US-Mexico border crisis. The spotlight on what was happening to migrant children exposed failures of policy and government administration which pushed then President Trump to reverse the family separation policy. ProPublica’s sustained coverage about the crisis, and its amplification on social media,

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid, 87.
\textsuperscript{151} Eaton, M. A. (2011). From the seats to the streets: MoveOn.org and the mobilization of online progressive activists (Doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder), 127.
galvanized public support for immigrant children, a group without any political power, and built pressure to hold powerful decision-makers and government officials accountable.

**Organizational Mission and Structure**

ProPublica is a 501c3 nonprofit whose mission is to “expose abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by government, business, and other institutions, using the moral force of investigative journalism to spur reform through the sustained spotlighting of wrongdoing.” As stated on their website, ProPublica is organized as an independent, nonprofit newsroom that publishes investigative journalism powered by moral force. ProPublica’s main strategies in support of this mission are to conduct deep investigations into complex issues and to stick with those issues “as long as it takes to hold power to account.” The staff of about 100 journalists report on “stories with the potential to spur real-world impact.” Among their accomplishments are contributions to new legislation, reversals of harmful policies and practices, and accountability for leaders at all levels. Per Donaldson (2007), when advocacy is not integrated into mission, the barrier it poses is as strong as not having the resources. In ProPublica’s case, advocacy is embedded into its mission and overall strategy, eschewing risks from resource dependency threat.

**Background & Historical Context**

The policy that led to family separation was initially part of the “Zero-Tolerance Policy” passed in 2017, and a culmination of the history and political environment around immigration.
enforcement since the birth of the republic.\textsuperscript{154} Unaccompanied minors at the US-Mexico border is a longstanding issue stemming from violence Central America as well as US immigration policy. The number of children and their families crossing the US border to flee violence reached the highest point in 2014. The number of children apprehended in 2009 was just under 20,000, but by 2014, the number had vaulted to about 68,500, a 343\% increase.\textsuperscript{155}

Within the backdrop of the U.S. immigration policy coupled with the 1990s “tough on crime” laws and the election of Trump who campaigned on anti-immigration reforms, was the roll out of the 2017 Zero-Tolerance Policy. This policy came to stand in for all of the Trump administration’s immigration deterrence policy, including the act of family separation.”\textsuperscript{156} Coverage of the family separation policy began in March 2017 when asylum workers spoke with Reuters voicing their concerns about the rollout of a policy that would separate children from their families crossing the U.S. border without documentation.\textsuperscript{157} As quickly as the story broke, the public interest swiftly faded and no further reports surfaced until nearly 8 months later, a local newspaper published an article in November 2017 reported on a spike in cases of immigrants being prosecuted for border crossing where children were separated from families. Despite concerns raised by NGOs in the Texas-Mexico border region, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) continued to deny the existence of the family separation policy, even while the policy continued to rip children from their parents.\textsuperscript{158} In her testimony before Congress

\textsuperscript{154} Examples of past immigration deterrence policy include: the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882; the Immigration and Nationality Action of 1965 which formed the modern immigration system; the Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, which allowed for myriad of ways to deport documented and undocumented immigrants; and “crimmigration,” the criminalization of immigration, policy changes post 9/11.


\textsuperscript{157} Ibid, 29-31.
in April 2018 Secretary Nielsen of DHS denied the existence of the family separation policy, despite data leaked by the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) showing that 700 children had been separated by DHS.\textsuperscript{159} Former First Lady Barbara Bush penned an op-ed in the \textit{Washington Post} criticizing the family separation policy.\textsuperscript{160} As Chacon observes, all of the press attention only drove the White House administration to distance itself from the policy, claiming that the policy was a result of the Democrat’s law making, rather than trying to address the root of immigration policy, such as developing legal pathways to citizenship and acknowledging the U.S.’s role in militarizing Central America.\textsuperscript{161}

**ProPublica’s Advocacy Strategies and Tactics**

*Indirect Strategy with Direct Policy Outcome*

The pivotal point arrived in a ProPublica exclusive report by Ginger Thompson titled, “Listen to Children Who’ve Just Been Separated from Their Parents at the Border,” based on audio recordings leaked by HHS, published on June 18, 2018.\textsuperscript{162} In the recordings, children can be heard sobbing repeatedly for their “Mami” and “Papá,” “crying so hard they can barely breathe.”\textsuperscript{163} Part of ProPublica’s advocacy tactic is releasing the audio recording with the article to, “add real-life sounds of suffering to a contentious policy debate that has so far been short on input from those with the most at stake: immigrant children.” Thompson’s reporting on the scale of the issue (2,300 children, more than 100 under the age of 4) and the specificity of the


conditions (warehouses, tents, or big box stores) in which they were held “[broke] the silence.” The exposé coalesced the brewing storm of rebukes of the policy from both Democrats and Republicans.

Up to this point, there had been attempts to pass bills to stop the policy that failed upon meeting a GOP majority and President. Thompson’s online reporting helped catalyze public outcry and built pressure from Republican and Democrat politicians which ultimately spurred direct action at the highest level of government, the Executive branch. On June 22nd, mere days after ProPublica released the audio of children crying for their parents, Trump passed Executive Order #13841, an immediate policy reversal to end the family separation policy.

Indirect Strategy: Shaping Public Opinion

According to a Poll conducted by Harvard CAPS/Harris, released around the time of Thompson’s article, 61% of Americans blame the Trump Administration for separating children from their parents and an overwhelming majority (88%) of Americans opposed the separation of families. While a causal link is difficult to prove but the shift in public opinion shortly after the ProPublica exposé is evident and shaping public opinion, directly or indirectly, is nonetheless an effective advocacy tactic.

Indirect Strategy: Correcting Misinformation

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164 Ibid.
168 Executive Order #13841 only ended the practice of family separation but upheld the zero-tolerance policy under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) and section 1325(a), title 8 of United States Code, which makes it a federal crime for non-citizens or nationals to cross the US border without authorization.
The crisis at the border is a decades-long problem and the Trump presidential campaign in 2016 relied on the perception of a “surge” of criminal immigrants crossing the border to justify tougher immigration policies. CBP data (1995-2019) showed that in 2017 when Trump entered office, the number of border apprehensions were at an all-time low, under 304,000 compared to its peak at 1.6 million in 2000. In a ProPublica article published June 25, 2018, Hannah Drier filed a report on Zero-Tolerance policy titled, “I’ve Been Reporting on MS-13 for a Year. Here Are the 5 Things Trump Gets Most Wrong.” Spending a year reporting on the ground about MS-13 gangs and analyzing CBP data, Drier found that the criminal immigrant narrative was grossly misleading and incorrect. Only “a fraction of 1% of the total number of families apprehended at the border,” less than 200 cases were of false family claims, and of those, none were MS-13 related. Since 2012, of the hundreds of thousands of unaccompanied minors border crossings, only 56 were suspected of gang ties. In addition, counter to Trump’s claims, the number of MS-13 gang members has remained the same for the last 10 years. Correcting the record and rooting policy in reality serve dual advocacy outcome goals: 1) Exposing misinformation perpetrated by Trump Administration officials to justify accusations of gang affiliation to detain families and separate children from their parents; and 2) By giving voice to innocent minors who are wrongly accused, this reporting can demonstrate that immigrants arriving to the US-Mexico border are legitimate asylum seekers, looking for safety.

**Indirect Strategy: Sustaining Attention on the Issue**

Despite months after the EO was passed, Ginger Thompson of ProPublica filed another report on November 27, 2018, “Families are Still Being Separate at the Border, Months After ‘Zero

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171 Drier, H. (2018). I’ve been reporting on MS-13 for a year. Here are the 5 things Trump gets most wrong. ProPublica.
Tolerance’ was Reversed.” During the months since EO 13841 was passed, Catholic Charities encountered 16 new separation cases, and another case surfaced when a father called ProPublica after his four-year-old son was ripped out of his grasp by a CBP agent. In this case, by sustaining attention on the issue and devoting staff resources, ProPublica was able to track down the child who was in temporary foster care in NYC.

*Indirect Strategy: Humanizing the Issue to Raise Awareness*

Thompson’s November 2018 report focused on a particular case of Julio, a Salvadoran father held in Southern Texas for crossing the border without authorization. Julio and his son arrived at the border seeking asylum with letters in hand to explain his reason for fleeing gang violence sworn statements vouching that was never involved in criminal activity. CBP administration alleged that Julio was an MS-13 gang member but refused to provide any evidence of Julio’s gang affiliation. According to Julio’s lawyer, “They [CBP agents] aren’t playing by the rules...they’re treating him like a criminal so they can justify taking away his son.” A civil rights and family lawyer described this case as follows: “constitutionally, before a parent is separated from a child, you are entitled to due process...some decision in a dark corner by the Border Patrol doesn’t meet that standard.” Collins explains that “developing empathy for the experiences of individuals and groups different than ourselves is one of the essential components of building coalitions for social change.” By using online advocacy to report stories such as Julio’s, ProPublica is able to illuminate the concerns of undocumented migrants and humanize a

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group often portrayed in abstract terms as a border security threat. In this way, ProPublica demonstrates the effect of using personal narratives to sway public opinion.

**Measuring ProPublica’s Advocacy Effectiveness**

*Defining Online Media Impact in the Context of Journalism*

According to Richard Tofel (2012), circulation numbers and advertisement sales are typical benchmarks of success of privately owned publishing companies. In the context of journalism, impact is defined differently and Tofel discusses the two forms of journalism in which ProPublica engages: *explanatory journalism*, centered on affecting the reader, is measured by reader engagement to a story—its intensity, the degree to which it is shared, the extent to which it causes interaction;\(^\text{175}\) and *investigative journalism* which seeks to expose information that someone with some modicum of power (a person, group or institution) seeks to keep hidden. The impact of *investigative journalism* is difficult to measure and requires measuring changes beyond those in the readers’ minds, to “changes in behaviors, policies, practices, legislations or some such.”\(^\text{176}\) Tofel further explains that to effect change requires not only raising awareness and changing the minds of readers but also depends on readers’ “concerted political or other action to bring about change.” More importantly, the potential for real change lies in the actions of “a few key decision-makers or with larger issue elites.” ProPublica’s advocacy tactics have the combined effect of raising awareness, empowering readers to change things.\(^\text{177}\)

ProPublica’s online advocacy strategy combines multiple indirect advocacy tactics such as research, media advocacy, and online activism. The ability to shape the online news media

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175 Tofel cautions that audience reach and impact are not one and the same.


177 Ibid, 6.
coverage of issues, while an indirect strategy, can yield direct policy outcomes. Thompson’s exposé on family separation became a pivotal moment for immigration reform advocacy. There is literature to support the idea that the key to lobbying success is being able to control and shape a debate. ProPublica’s ability to spotlight issues and sustain media attention on pressing issues, demonstrate the impact of agenda setting, and issue framing to persuade readers to take on the role of citizen lobbyists. By leveraging the accessibility and low costs of the Internet, ProPublica is able to invest resources into in-depth reporting and to distribute their issue frame widely to catalyze the public and key influential decision-makers into taking the necessary action.

Discussion & Analysis

Resource Dependency Theory

Resource Dependency theory suggests that given limited resources, MoveOn cannot possibly afford to rely on purchasing advertisements for every issue it wants to engage. As a MoveOn staff whom Eaton interviewed explains, “earning media coverage by getting people out on the street and showing there’s a base of support for an issue is just a critical tactic.” Earned media publicity is a free to low-cost way to get media attention without having to purchase ads, a tactic used by MoveOn to circumvent resource limitations. Eaton remarks that MoveOn invests heavily in time and resources to train active members how to organize events that would attract media attention, generate earned media coverage, to get its messages across social media channels. ProPublica acknowledges on their website that “investigative journalism requires a

180 Ibid, 152.
great deal of time and resources, and many newsrooms can no longer afford to take on this kind of deep-dive reporting” and states their commitment to uncover the truth, “no matter how long it takes or how much it costs.” With the lion’s share of funding coming from public donations, ProPublica has earned a legitimized position through public support to spend the money and resources necessary to hold power to account and spur social and political reform. Established as online nonprofits, ProPublica and MoveOn, have lower overhead costs, thereby, relieving some of resource limitation pressure that other typical brick-and-mortar nonprofits face.

**Indirect and Direct Advocacy Strategies**

This research finds that both MoveOn and ProPublica have been able to leverage online advocacy to apply indirect/outside and direct/inside approaches to targeted audiences and this research focuses on the external factors that impact these strategies. ProPublica’s and MoveOn’s advocacy strategies may appear at first glance to be working from outside the system (e.g., public education campaigns, organizing protests, mass media coverage, etc.), but this research finds evidence of a spillover effect that impacts changes from inside the system (e.g., legislative lobbying, policy reform, giving expert testimony, etc.). ProPublica’s reporting uncovers the CBP agency’s harmful separation of children from their families and the Trump administration’s repeated attempts to deny the existence of this policy. Leveraging online advocacy to engage with a mass audience to lobby for change, particularly targeting key decision makers and insiders, can apply pressure directly on administrative government agencies and elected representatives to implement legislative and policy reforms. Similarly, MoveOn utilizes a suite of indirect/outside the system strategies to inform the public and coordinate online actions and

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181 https://www.propublica.org/about/

offline demonstrations and protests. To advocate more directly, MoveOn asks members to send letters using organizational talking points to frame the issue addressed to politicians voicing their concerns, lobbying for changes inside the system.

*Leveraging Online Advocacy to Influence Policy Outcomes*

An emerging body of research explores how organizations seek out news media attention in an attempt to influence decision makers and influence policy outcomes. Some scholars say that the news-making ability is “critical to success or failure of social movements and interest group efforts.” Chalmers’ & Shotton’s theoretical framework explains the crucial role of online advocacy is applicable to both ProPublica and MoveOn. By shaping the news-making process, ProPublica is exercising a form of lobbying using online news media advocacy. Thompson’s exposé on family separation published in June 2018 became a pivotal moment for immigration reform advocacy. As an organization that can shine a spotlight on salient issues and is committed to putting the necessary time and resources to sustain media attention on pressing issues, ProPublica’s virtual platform is able wield control over agenda setting, how an issue is framed, the extent to which the issue is given attention, and to persuade readers to take action to shape policy outcomes. Chalmers & Shotton assert, “controlling and shaping a debate is, therefore, key to lobbying success.” ProPublica uses the accessibility of the internet to distribute in-depth reporting to mobilize the public and key influential decision-makers. By sustaining coverage of family separation and zero-tolerance policy at the U.S.-Mexico border, they helped to coalesce public pressure on then-President Trump to reverse the policy through an executive order.

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Creation of a Grassroots Online Community & Collective Power

One of MoveOn’s most effective approach is to use the internet to connect geographically dispersed members, develop an “image of community” that made members acting in isolation from their computers feel part of a larger, powerful collective. Eaton observes that “by providing members with a sense of power in numbers, MoveOn also empowered members to actively oppose the policies of the Bush administration and the conservative movement in general.” This form of citizen empowerment that relies on internet-based organizing to run campaigns, powered by grassroots energy, has become the standard for running Internet savvy national campaigns.186 Carty’s (2010) study credits MoveOn for being a “grassroots virtual community” that pioneered an approach that combined e-activism with offline engagement in protest and electoral politics to excite large constituencies to subvert the increasingly centralized political system and centers of corporate domination.187

Overall, MoveOn’s efforts to engage and mobilize both online and offline supporters to take action, volunteer, donate funds, and lobby to influence public policy and elections resulted in successful outcomes. MoveOn’s advocacy model comprises of a bi-directional strategic decision-making process coupled with bottom-up feedback-based agenda setting, within an online decentralized multi-regional organizing structure. As a forerunner in the online progressive movement, MoveOn developed a model of online political activism that has become the standard playbook for all levels of advocacy campaigns and can be adapted to any nonprofit that wants to advocate effectively.188

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Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

This research sought to answer the question of what external factors contribute to a nonprofit organization’s ability to effectively influence public policy through the use of online advocacy. The findings suggest that while there are many barriers that can deter nonprofits from engaging in advocacy and lobbying activities, nonprofits can overcome these barriers by leveraging use of online advocacy tools to effectively influence public policy and catalyze social change. The digital divide, a form of resource dependency is a barrier to entry when access to the Internet was nascent and computing costs were high, but as the Internet and information technology have become ubiquitous and less cost prohibitive, the digital divide is no longer as much of an obstacle. Established as online nonprofits, ProPublica and MoveOn have lower overhead costs, thereby uncoupling the organizations from certain resource limitations that other typical brick-and-mortar nonprofits face.

Forming coalitions is widely recommended for organizing structures that promote effective nonprofit advocacy.\(^{189}\) Both MoveOn and ProPublica worked with other organizations to advocate the issues important to them. MoveOn’s advocacy model has been adapted by state, national, and international organizations. ProgressNow.org, formed in 2005 by Bobby Clark using the same online tactics learned from MoveOn staffers with whom he had worked with on the Howard Dean campaign. Like MoveOn, ProgressNow advocates for many of the same issues as MoveOn, including the Iraq war using its email lists to shape messages and mobilize support for issues and candidates.\(^{190}\) ProPublica’s journalists collaborated with local activists working

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with families at the border and civil rights organizations’ such as the ACLU to pursue lawsuits to force the government to reunite children with their families.

One of my findings is that nonprofit advocacy encompasses more than public policy but can also catalyze social and political change. MoveOn is able to influence legislation on two fronts: 1) directly influencing legislation by mobilizing “citizen lobbying,” and 2) indirectly helping to elect progressive congressional and presidential candidates. MoveOn’s strategy also involves investing heavily in training active members to generate “earned media,” a low-cost way to get media attention and shape public opinion on a given issue without purchasing ads. ProPublica’s online media advocacy strategy is two-fold: 1) To humanize the issue, raise awareness, and change the hearts and minds of readers, ProPublica published Thompson’s report with the leaked audio of children crying for their parents which struck a chord with the American public, essentially breaking the silence; and 2) To sustain focus on the issue and catalyze action from key decision-makers, ProPublica continued to publish on the crises at the border, months after the Executive Order was passed to reverse family separation policy, with dual intent: first, to expose misinformation perpetuated by Trump and his administration, and secondly to counter the narrative that these children pose as a security threat because they are in fact legitimate asylum seekers.

A major finding of this research is that wealth and power are not strictly linked to an organization’s capacity to influence public policy. MoveOn and ProPublica, though different in their mission and purpose, both understand how to maneuver advocacy strategies depending on what the campaign needed, from public education and awareness raising, mobilizing citizens lobbying at the grassroots level, organizing virtual and offline events, media advocacy, putting

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191 Media advocacy is defined as the strategic use of mass media and community organizing as a means to advance social or public policy (Jernigan & Wright, 1996).
a spotlight on current policy failures to local, state, and executive branch attention, to aiding the election of candidates at all levels.

As the literature shows, advocacy is an important function for not only 501c4 nonprofit advocacy groups that engage directly in advocacy activities, but to 501c3s such as private foundations and public charities as well. Regardless of whether or not advocacy is at the core of their mission, 501c3s have enormous potential and power to influence public policy and empower their constituents. Afterall, as the sector to pioneer the first global people-to-people communications network, nonprofit organizations have the ability to leverage the Internet and use online advocacy to overcome the digital divide and to some degree disrupt the third sector’s power imbalances. This research presents the two pathways to influence policy with major power discrepancies between them. One way to is where private foundations with resources and insider access to decision-makers on Capitol Hill pump enormous wealth through lobbyists or grantmaking to steer other nonprofits’ strategic direction. The other method is where smaller nonprofits that have developed trust and intimate knowledge about the communities in which they serve, can tap into diverse networks of supporters, build coalitions among other groups to mobilize citizen lobbying at the grassroots level. MoveOn and ProPublica not only pioneer online activism but also leverage online advocacy to engage with current and new stakeholders, paving a way for mobilizing at the grassroots level, ultimately shifting power toward concerned citizens and those without political access away from special interests, professional lobbyists, wealthy elites, and Washington insiders. MoveOn and ProPublica have both catalyzed online advocacy strategies into offline practical solutions that impact the fate of real peoples’ lives.

**Recommendations**
Several important lessons can be drawn for nonprofit organizations wishing to become more effective policy advocates. The strategies and tactics that MoveOn and ProPublica use that were successful can offer nonprofits of similar size a topology of advocacy strategies that can be adapted and put into practice as part of an overall advocacy repertoire:

- **Empowering citizen lobbying at the grassroots level**: MoveOn is able to create a community among online supporters by defining issues in terms of us versus them to form an in-group identity. They also use activist identity formation to help individuals feel that their participation contributes to a larger powerful collective effort in a way that is empowering them to lobby directly to elected officials to take actions that better represent the people’s will. Their flexible, convenient opt-in model enables concerned citizens, who might otherwise be too busy or unable to physically engage in traditional advocacy, to connect with online activism. ProPublica’s connection to grassroots lobbying is more indirect and tenuous—raising public awareness, shaping public opinion, empowering readers to act—though still a valuable strategy, nonetheless.

- **Leveraging online media advocacy**: MoveOn and ProPublica leverage online media advocacy in unique ways to shape news coverage. MoveOn relies on earned media, engaging the press to cover their events or to publish letters to the editor to promote their organization’s issue frame while ProPublica’s journalists use their reporting platform to shape public opinion. Gibson recognizes the limitations of media advocacy observing that reliance on journalists working for private for-profit media constrains being able to reach policy makers and citizens in anyway more than sporadically. Despite Gibson’s reservations, formed as a 501c3 nonprofit, ProPublica, can commit to high-quality, in-

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192 Jernigan & Wright (1996) define media advocacy as the strategic use of mass media and community organizing as a means to advance social or public policy.
depth reporting, prioritize coverage on issues salient to the public, and devote the necessary resources to sustain public interest to compel decision-makers, in positions of power, to change public policy.\textsuperscript{193} ProPublica is able to reach policy makers and concerned citizens by using personal narratives to humanize the issue and they also use their online platform to try to correct misinformation. Given the proliferation of misinformation generated in online media, a real challenge for media advocacy is how to stand out from the noise, or in areas where people may not have readily available access to the Internet, online media advocacy’s impact can be muted. However, as MoveOn’s model demonstrates, when online media campaigns are paired with on-the-ground advocacy tactics like demonstrations, protests, and action events, they can mobilize citizens into organizing at the grassroots level. Another recognized limitation of using media activism as a tool for policy change is that you can’t have a media strategy without an overall strategy.\textsuperscript{194} Advocacy is baked into the mission of MoveOn and ProPublica. Shaping media coverage that produces results requires a coherent political strategy, a specific policy goal must be identified, and a community of committed supporters should also be mobilized.

- **Engaging stakeholders’ input to increase political representation**: The advent of online media has opened new opportunities for innovative channels of direct, on-going public engagement between nonprofit organizations and stakeholders, including social platforms such as Blogs, Vlogs, Twitter, FaceBook, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc. MoveOn uses email and online media to attract new supporters, expand political representation by


providing concerned citizens who would otherwise be too busy, a fast and convenient way to send letters to elected officials, attend protests, and invite their friends to participate in online activism. ProPublica’s investigative journalism is meant to do more than merely inform readers but also empower them to change behaviors and ultimately policies. Shaping the public’s support of repealing family separation and sustaining the spotlight on Zero Tolerance policy, ProPublica’s reporting empowers readers to act and apply pressure on Trump to reverse the family separation policy.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The Limits of Online Advocacy

As mentioned, the imbalance of power and privilege is an incessant challenge in the nonprofit sector and this study finds evidence to suggest that an organization’s capacity to advocate is not strictly linked to access to wealth and resources. While billion-dollar private foundations have wealth and insider access to decision-makers, smaller nonprofits can tap into diverse networks of supporters, utilizing online advocacy to help expand capacity to communicate, engage with, and mobilize current and new stakeholders to take action and influence public policy. Whether or not the smaller nonprofits have built trust and legitimacy with the communities they serve is an area that has received relatively little attention.

In the existing literature, there are scholars who argue that online advocacy is simply a new tool for the continued dominance of those already with power and influence, echoing the words of Audre Lorde: The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.195 Online advocacy tools have their limitations. MoveOn’s campaign to mobilize public dissent of the

Bush Administration’s invasion of Iraq ultimately did not stop the U.S. from invading Iraq or prevent the casualties endured by Iraqi civilians and American military personnel and their families. ProPublica’s reporting on family separation policy uses personal narratives of migrant children and families but the reporters were not migrant themselves. Questions about the relationship between the nonprofits and the people they represent are worth pondering and exploring in future research: “were the interests of the Iraqis’ or Americans who fought the war represented by those who advocated on their behalf? Could ProPublica’s reporting put their subjects at risk from public exposure?” As of this writing, thousands of migrant children remain unaccounted for and separated from their parents. Would more news coverage compel readers and decision-makers to take further action or would fatigue from the onslaught of information lead to apathy, and inaction? Who holds positions of power in the relationships between reporter-storyteller, activist-constituent, advocate-client? An American journalist embedded with migrants, using the children and their families’ personal narratives to shine a light on their plight, while noble also reinforces the power dynamics of the White Savior Industrial Complex.

It is worth noting that MoveOn and ProPublica were formed at a time when the Internet was nascent, on its way to become the ubiquitous communications tool it is today. The founders had the knowledge, power, and opportunity to innovate online advocacy—using email communications, posting information and updates through online channels, publishing online news reporting, distributing issue framing far and wide—to engage more people to participate in public policy change. Institutional isomorphism is defined as when an organization creates a model that innovates within a given field with proven results, and other organizations follow to adopt their model.196 The advocacy models perfected by MoveOn and ProPublica, though

innovative at the time they were formed, have become standard practice in the advocacy playbook and might not hold the same weight in the broader scope of online advocacy work nearly two decades later.

There are many variables to what makes a successful advocacy campaign, and a cross case study analysis can go only so far given the data available. Although resources such as Eaton and Chacon included data collected from interviews with MoveOn employees and direct observations from the field, a limitation of this research is the scarcity of direct primary data sources. This research could benefit from studying the relationship between the nonprofit organization and the groups that they advocate for. Borrowing Guo and Musso’s (2007) representational framework, how well an organization “acts for” and “stands for” the interest of their constituents has a direct correlation with constituent participation or input. There are two mechanisms by which levels of constituent inputs can affect an organization’s advocacy efforts: 1) when the composition of board members and leaders of an organization reflect the community population; and 2) the connection between participatory representation and advocacy outcomes.197 This research looks at external factors and the discussion and analysis were limited to the engagement between the nonprofit organizations and the targeted policy and change influences (e.g, the public, other nonprofits, decision-makers). Admittedly, this research also focuses on two very specific nonprofit organizations and the results would be different had the nonprofits chosen were not primarily operated online and integrated advocacy tools at a later point in their development. Future research could incorporate studying the relationship between the nonprofit and constituents looking at internal factors—such as whether the composition of an organization’s leaders reflects their constituents’ characteristics and the relationship between the

community and the nonprofit—that contribute to a nonprofit’s capacity to influence public policy through the use of online advocacy.

In today’s digital world we are online more than ever, people have more fears and distrust of institutions, 24/7 news cycle churns out stories every minute, online media can be a valuable tool for nonprofits to disseminate and correct misinformation, to mobilize citizens into taking actions such as getting out the vote, lobbying and applying pressure on government officials. This research contributes to the current knowledge on nonprofit advocacy and offers several important lessons for nonprofit organizations wishing to become more effective policy advocates. There is much at stake right now for nonprofits to play a pivotal role in safeguarding the changes that took decades of advocacy and lobbying to accomplish. The Internet after all, contrary to popular belief, originated from a small group of intrepid nonprofits who built the first global NGO electronic network.\(^{198}\) Therefore, who else is in better position to leverage the advantages and the possibilities of the internet than the very sector that help built it in the first place? Technology in the form of online advocacy can present an important set of tools for nonprofits to engage and enable the next generation of stakeholders—who are younger, more adept with using technology, and more inclusive of marginal groups—to participate in shaping public policy, political decision-making, and ultimately to self-advocate.

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