

GIS / Mapping

Case Study: MoveOn.org

*Written by Stephanie Lindenbaum
for the OSI Information Program*



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OSI - GIS/Mapping Project

Case Study: Stamen Design - MoveOn.org

Persons Contacted: Eric Rodenbeck, and Eli Pariser

ISSUE: Two large advocacy organizations fear that their communities have become fragmented throughout the country. How can they re-mobilize their support?

SOLUTION: Hire an innovative San Francisco-based graphic design firm to create dynamic maps facilitating live chats and documenting user experiences at rallies and marches.

(Adapted from interviews with Eric Rodenbeck, Stamen Design founder and lead designer and Eli Pariser, MoveOn's Executive Director)

Stamen Design, a boutique graphic design firm in California, spent a good portion of its time engaged in experimental work, exploring the boundaries of technology and design. Having worked on a number of data visualizations, including a mapping of the images in the data set of the Flickr website, Stamen developed a "narrative map" of its San Francisco street corner and posted it [online](#). Utilizing real-time data, the site explored interactivity in a type of socio-technological study and caught the eye of MoveOn, a family of political action-oriented organizations.

Since its inception in 1998, MoveOn has been using the web in innovative ways previously unknown to nonprofit organizations. From launching online petitions to soliciting campaign donations through secure web servers, MoveOn has consistently look for methods of connecting and strengthening their supporter base, and in demonstrating the efficacy of their advocacy aims. They initially contacted Stamen to help realize an idea they had devised for a phone operation prior to the Iraq war, the "Virtual March on Washington."

MoveOn assigned participants specific one-minute times at which to call their senators requesting that they vote against US involvement in the war. From 9-5 on the designated day, MoveOn members telephoned their senators literally every minute, non-stop. Stamen followed MoveOn's ideas and developed a map which ran live online throughout the day. Every minute the map requested a different series of call subjects and then displayed the location of each caller on a US map, along with the content of their call. As Eli Pariser, MoveOn's Executive Director, notes, "People have trouble conceptualizing what 100,000 people looks like, or what 'all across the country' truly means." The visualization of the sheer enormity of the numbers of participants got people to pay attention to MoveOn's message, more powerfully than mere statistics on the activity.

Stamen acknowledges that as opposed to their own studies of the boundaries of technology's capacity, MoveOn's project was much more deliberate, even defiant. Designed to demonstrate broad opposition to the Bush administration's enthusiasm over an Iraqi conflict, MoveOn and Stamen's map project received tremendous feedback, largely from the media and from the organization's own supporters.

Over the course of the next two years, Stamen developed at least two dozen maps for MoveOn. "We rarely developed a list of specs," says Rodenbeck, Stamen's founder and lead designer. "MoveOn would come to us with an event and together we worked on a way to figure out how to map it or visualize it." These events ranged from candlelight vigils prior to the Iraq war to house parties with activist film screenings to bake sales. User participation in some of the interactive maps hit over 27,000.

With each project the maps became more advanced and increasingly responsive. During one planning meeting Wes Boyd, MoveOn's Founder and Executive Director, wondered whether it would be possible to increase the interactivity between the members and the organization as a whole. Stamen had already been working to improve upon the complexity and capability of the maps, and were ready to establish a "town hall" mechanism, by which announcers at MoveOn headquarter, via a live audio stream integrated into the map, would announce a question and provide a form for response. This live feedback visualization enabled members not only to pose questions to filmmakers, politicians and pundits but allowed them to view others' questions as well. As Rodenbeck says, "this let the community see itself in a way it couldn't before, which is a remarkable feeling. Not only is there a 'I'm that dot in San Francisco' response, but also 'I can see that there's something [similar] going on in Reno, Boston - all over the country.'"

In a twist on the project's interactivity, Stamen eventually added another function to their MoveOn maps, enabling users to respond to the maps themselves. They were therefore able to use the map as a feedback mechanism for map capabilities. Although a frequent user request was to improve upon the ability for members to communicate with other people on the map, MoveOn made it clear that it wished to facilitate local, personal meet-ups rather than virtual ones. The power in the mapping project lay not in its ability to establish regional groups but to solidify the community on a national level.

Working alongside MoveOn in the development of each subsequent map, Stamen ultimately ceded control over the technology, passing it on to MoveOn staff to create and manipulate future maps in-house. Pariser believes this has met MoveOn's goals to make their online tools available to all prospective partners in their advocacy work. He acknowledges,

however, that mapping is still somewhat embryonic in his world:
"I think it's useful in this context to give people a sense of
the breadth of the campaigns, but I'm not sure if we're doing
more [than that]. There's a lot of room for innovation, and it's
a powerful toolset that I don't think we've fully figured out."



Figure 1: West Coast, 7:43pm PDT East Coast, 5:19pm PDT
Question was asked of participants: "As someone who hasn't been to an event like this before, tell us - in one sentence - why you came." Participant answers were displayed on the map in real time.

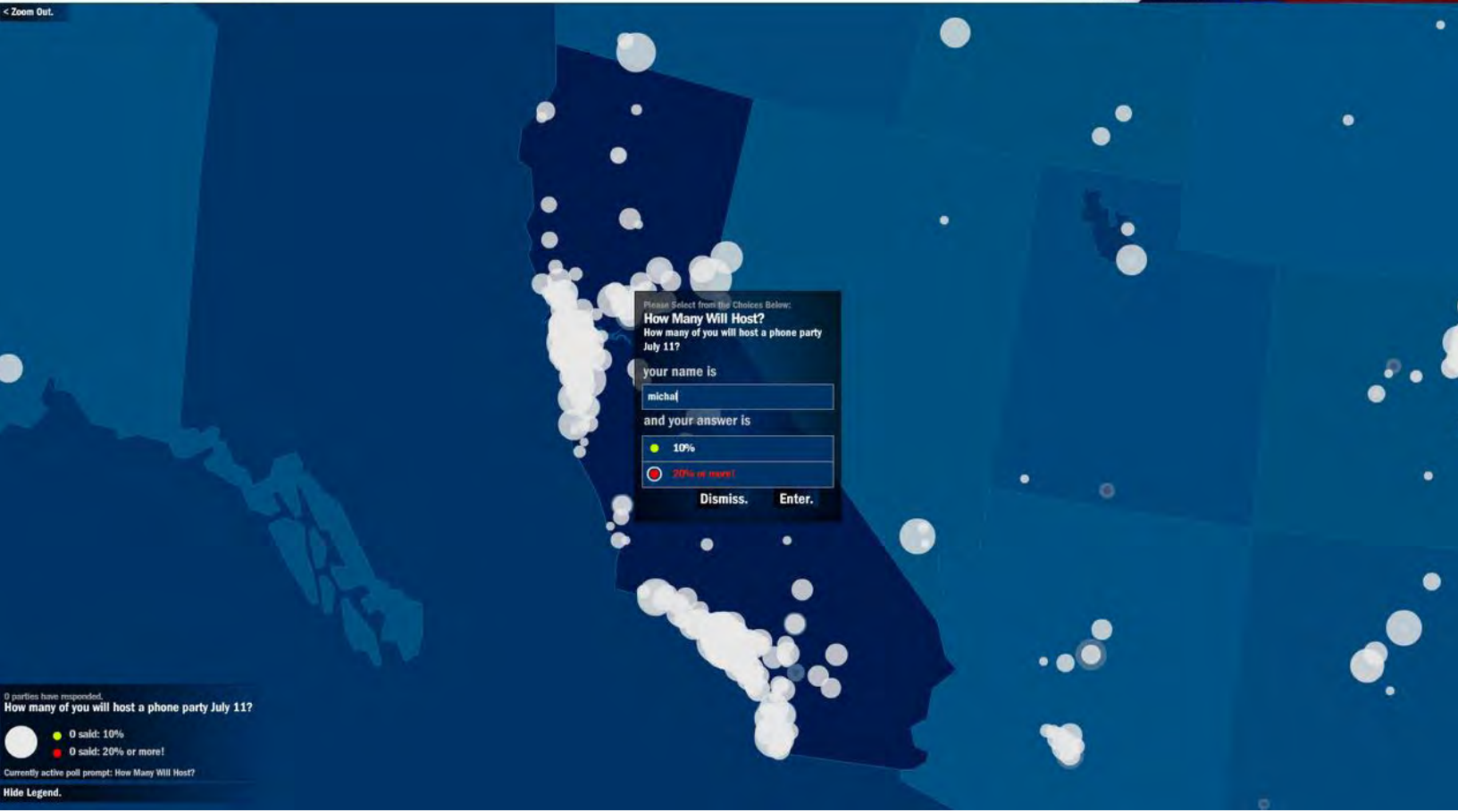


Figure 2: West Coast, 7:43pm PDT
An example of the mechanism used to solicit feedback from conference participants.



Figure 3: West Coast, 7:52pm PDT

Participant responses to questions are displayed on the map in real time.

A full set of screenshots describing the initial use of the mapping application is available at:

http://clients.stamen.com/moveon_screenshots/