

**TOOL FOR CHANGE OR JUST MORE EMAIL SPAM?
A STUDY OF ON-LINE PETITIONS AND THEIR EFFICACY**

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Abstract

This paper examines a set of two hundred on-line petitions that were produced by the same two-person team over the course of eight months. While only a few of them were completely successful--as measured by full compliance with the petition request, it is possible to draw a few tentative conclusions about what factors contribute to a successful petition. The most important factors in successful on-line petitions would seem to be: email distribution to a targeted list of socially active individuals who share the same core political and social beliefs that underlie the petition; targets who belong to a stable, democratic nation with an established history of protecting free expression; and very specific, easily achievable requests that do not represent significant expenditure or effort on the part of the party who is called on to take action.

Key words: *Petition, social change, advocacy, politics, Feng Jianmei, Pussy Riot, Hy-Vee, Lange's metalmark butterfly*

Few people would deny that social media is now embedded in the fabric of political life. It is a fixed point in the landscape of social change even though the extent of its power has been debated and challenged. Recent studies have considered the role of social media in the United States' Occupy movement (DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun 2012; Juris 2012), the Arab Spring (Halverson, Ruston, and Trethewey 2013), Danish elections (Jensen 2013), Norwegian elections (Karlsen 2012), protests against military exploitation of children in Uganda (Meek 2012), protests against the abuses of South African President Jacob Zuma (Terblanche 2011), discussions of climate change (Schafer 2012), and Dutch civic engagement (Bekkers, Moody, and Edwards 2012). But few, if any, studies so far have focused specifically on the power of on-line petitions to create awareness, instigate dialog, or effect social or political change.

On-line petitions offer an irresistibly easy and fast way to demonstrate support for a cause. Several websites now specialize in offering on-line tools for the quick and easy creation of a petition with opportunities for sharing it to networks established on the creator's other social media accounts. One such site is Care2.com which can be accessed globally and which features user-created petitions as the centerpiece of its services. The official website for the United States Whitehouse, whitehouse.gov, recently expanded to provide a similar service. Some advocacy organizations have made on-line petitions an integral part of their web outreach. For example, the National Resources Defense Council hosts its own petitions at www.savebiogems.org.

A set of two hundred petitions written and published at Care2.com during an eight-month period, October 2011 to May 2012, offers a good, consistent sample for an initial examination of what constitutes an effective on-line petition. All the petitions in this set were written and edited by the same two-person team; as a paid freelancer under contract with Care2.com, I wrote the petitions, and the editor was Kathleen Jercich, a full-time staff member at the same company. Because the writer and editor were in every case the same people, it is possible to assume that variables like the quality of writing, the

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balance of emotional appeal to intellectual appeal, clarity, and sufficient citation of facts were reasonably consistent throughout the sample. So this study aims to look at the factors that contributed to success or failure that go beyond what one can accomplish with verbal dexterity and gifted editing.

The success of a petition can be difficult to measure. Its impact may be delayed. A petition that does not achieve its intended result may still create awareness of a cause or a problem that becomes background to a future solution or movement. It can become part of a larger outcry or trend that is accompanied by other media voices like blogs, tweets, and youtubes. However such outcomes are virtually impossible to quantify.

Therefore the measurement of success employed by this study is compliance with the petition's "ask." "Ask" can be defined as the specific goal or action which is sought by the petition. Petitions usually ask for a change in law, a change in the treatment of an individual or a group, the performance of a duty, or the discontinuance of a perceived injustice. So this measurement looks at whether the intended result of the petition transpired. Of the two hundred petitions examined, thirty could initially be declared successful by this measurement. Of those thirty, however, eleven garnered fewer than one hundred signatures. So for the purposes of this study, it is assumed that those eleven petitions had little if any impact, leaving nineteen or 9.5% of the petitions demonstrating success. It is very important to note that this study makes absolutely no claim that the petitions deemed successful were the sole factor in determining the change that occurred. In all cases, other news and social media voices were present—and possibly more influential—than the petition, but the exact extent to which the petition was influential is, of course, impossible to quantify.

Once a set of successful petitions was isolated, the next step was to consider what the successful petitions had in common and, where possible, to examine how they differed from the unsuccessful petitions. The study sought answers to the following five questions:

- Are corporations more likely than governments and non-profit groups to comply with a petition request?
- Are petition targets in countries that cherish human rights, especially the right to freedom of expression, more likely to comply with a petition request?
- Are petitions that ask for the law to be changed or left unchanged as likely to succeed as other petitions?
- Do petition requests that can be accomplished with minimal or no financial outlay make a petition more likely to succeed?
- To what extent does a well-defined, specific request (called an "ask" in this study) make a petition more likely to succeed?

Corporate targets were defined as large, multi-employee, for-profit companies likely to sell stock. Within the sampling under consideration, corporations that were targeted included Urban Outfitters, Fox News, Hyatt Regency, and Chick-fil-A, to name some of the most well known. Out of the two hundred petitions studied, sixteen—or eight percent—had corporate targets. Not included in this group were petitions that asked government to regulate corporate behaviors. Of the successful petitions, four out of nineteen—or twenty-one percent had corporate targets.

Corporations may be more likely to respond positively to petitions because they have more to gain or lose than do state officials and non-profit organizations when their public images are tarnished. Possibly the most successful petition within the sampling studied was one which targeted Hy-Vee, a chain of

grocery stores. The petition was titled “Rehire Disabled Store Clerk Who Was Fired Over Twenty Cents.” This petition took up the cause of Kyle Dowie, a mentally disabled man who had for twenty-five years worked for a Hy-Vee store. His job was sorting and processing bottles and cans that customers returned to the store for a refund of their US \$.20 deposit. Dowie was known to collect discarded bottle deposit slips for customers who might come back for them. At some point, when returning his own bottles for deposit, he confused a customer’s slip for his own and was fired from his job as a direct result. My petition to rehire him quickly garnered 19,202 signatures over a few days after its creation. It was by no means the only media outcry calling for Dowie’s reinstatement, however. His story made several national publications in the United States, and the media in general framed him as the innocent victim of terrible injustice. A few days after the petition was created, a Hy-Vee official announced that the company had offered to rehire Dowie. The spokesperson said the company had been “mischaracterized,” thereby directly crediting the media furor with influencing the company’s decision (Chew 2012).

The success of the Dowie petition is a useful one because it embodies several elements of successful petitions suggested by this study. The petition featured a very specific, well-defined “ask,” i.e. the rehiring of a single employee. It is perhaps worth noting that the petition asked for nothing peripheral, like an apology, a raise, the dismissal of Dowie’s supervisor, or better training for store managers. The Dowie petition is also characterized by a goal that effectively cost the targeted corporation nothing. The company did, after all, have to pay somebody to sort and process recyclables, so rehiring Dowie did not in any way impact the company’s profit. In fact, Hy-Vee had quite a bit to lose in the way of public prestige if it did not offer to rehire Dowie. The petition also greatly benefitted from a focal point that was unambiguously innocent and from being distributed to a targeted email list, two petition success factors that will be considered later in this paper.

This study tentatively concludes that petitions targeting an individual or entity residing within a country that can be loosely defined as enjoying democratic freedoms is much more likely to succeed than a petition targeting an individual or entity within a nation that enjoys fewer democratic freedoms. Most of the petitions in this study were directed to targets within the United States, Canada, and Australia, but a few targeted individuals and entities in Greece, Great Britain, Russia, Chile, Peru, and Brazil. It should immediately be noted that what characterizes a free nation is highly subjective and likely to be influenced by nationalistic and experiential impulses of the person conducting the study. This paper attempts an objective definition of “free” and “democratic” using the United States of America State Department’s annual human rights reports on all the countries targeted in the petitions under study. Using those human rights reports as a guide, the study tentatively concludes that countries with fairly-conducted open elections, few or no recorded recent political assassinations, few or no disappearances that can be traced to government intervention, few if any government reprisals against critics of the government, little or no known torture, and prison conditions that meet international standards can be called “free” and “democratic.”

Of the two hundred petitions in the sample, 181—or 90.5%—targeted individuals or entities residing in free and democratic countries. However, one hundred percent or nineteen out of nineteen of the successful petitions were directed to individuals and entities in those free countries. Within the sampling under study, no petitions directed to targets in countries with weak human rights records were successful. Probably the most successful petition in the sampling—as measured by dramatic and sweeping results—was one targeting the Chevron Corporation and asking for damages for the oil spill off the coast of Brazil. Titled “Chevron, Pay For the Damage You Caused to Brazil’s Beaches!” this petition asked Chevron to pay US \$28 million in fines directly to Brazil to mitigate the damage to beaches, wildlife, and tourism in that country occurring as a direct result of the oil spill. Arguably, this was the petition in the sampling that made the greatest “ask” as measured by the cost of compliance with the petition request and the overall importance of the outcome. The petition was created in November of 2011 and, over the course of six months, garnered 16,736 signatures from signers all over the world. In December 2012,

Agencia Brasil (Platonow 2012) and News.com of Australia (2012) reported that Chevron had agreed to pay Brazil 311 million reals or US \$155 million in damages.

This study has no method by which to gauge the actual influence of the petition, but it is certainly important to note that Chevron was under pressure to pay damages from numerous sources—including global media and international law—and compliance with the petition request may be ineffable or even purely coincidental.

The Chevron petition illustrates two of the principals argued in this paper: that corporations may be more likely to comply with a petition request than either government entities or non-profit organizations and that targets residing within a free and democratic nation are more likely to bend to the will of petition signers. Though Chevron is technically a multi-national corporation, it is headquartered in San Ramon, California and is widely perceived as an American company. There was immense pressure on the company from both within and without the United States to make reparations to Brazil. Furthermore, oil companies have a history of paying damages to communities that suffer the effects of a spill. That history creates expectations that a company will settle money on the spill victims.

Clearly individuals and entities within countries which feature a high degree of media autonomy as well as a belief in the right to peacefully defy one's political leaders have more to lose by ignoring petitions that have gained a great deal of support. An unsuccessful petition may serve to further illustrate this principle. A cautionary example of failed media support for a victim of government abuse is the case of Feng Jianmei. A twenty-three year old Chinese woman, Jianmei was unable to pay a \$6300 "second child fine" when she became pregnant for a second time. Chinese law enforcers who arrested and beat her and forced her to have an abortion seven months into her pregnancy acted fully within the laws of their country that stipulate that Jianmei was eligible to have only one child. I was one of a throng of journalists who commented on this case when I wrote a petition on behalf of Jianmei ("China, Grant Poor Women Reproductive Choice" 2012) that garnered 14,316 signatures before being closed on December 2012. The petition specifically asked the Chinese government to re-examine its one-child policy and, in particular, the cruelty with which it is enforced.

Media compassion for Jianmei had exactly the opposite effect that Western writers and journalists who took up her cause hoped for. The Chinese government publically apologized to Jianmei's family in the media. But a CNN article reports that Jianmei's family was systematically harassed in the aftermath of the media furor. The same article reports that Deng, Jianmei's husband, had disappeared without explanation. Far from examining its policies, China's government retaliated against the bad press generated by Jianmei's case by further abusing the victims. It must be noted that my petition was one of dozens of national on-line publications calling for justice for Jianmei and therefore not solely responsible for further harms brought on the Jianmei family. However, this example does illustrate the need for caution when petitioning the government of totalitarian states where civic freedoms are historically under-protected.

A similar case of a failed petition that targeted a country not famous for human rights protections was the one I wrote on behalf of Pussy Riot ("Free anti-Putin protesters"). Pussy Riot is a group of young Russian women who engage anonymously in a style of social activism sometimes referred to as "street theater." On the occasion of their arrest, they appeared in masks and costumes and danced freestyle to an obscene anti-Putin song in a Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow. The young women were held in prison for several months before their trial with reports streaming in that they were not properly fed (Wilson 2012). My petition called for their release from prison and for charges against them to be dropped. Again, this request was only a small part of the global outcry on behalf of the activists that included on-line newspapers, blogs, and social networking sites. Among those who requested mercy for Pussy Riot were leaders of the very church at which they had staged their action. However, their trial produced harsh prison sentences for two of the women found guilty. This example points to a less clear-

cut set of cautions than the Jianmei case. Russia does claim to be a democracy, but the Soviet legacy of repressing rather than fostering dissent and open criticism of government lingers and the country's commitment to the protection of political thought, if such a theoretical commitment exists, does not reach far back into the country's history. While it is not obvious that Russia reacted to criticism by imposing a harsher sentence than it would have otherwise, it is fairly certain that media support for Pussy Riot had no role in mitigating the group's punishment.

Of the two hundred petitions in the sample, sixty-four or thirty-two percent asked for the law to be changed or for a proposed law not to be enacted. Of the nineteen successful petitions, eight or forty-two percent asked for a change in law or for a proposed law not be enacted. These statistics tentatively support a conclusion that petitions that seek to alter the law are somewhat more likely to succeed than other petitions. One petition that was successful, by the terms of this study, called for California to enact a homeowner bill of rights to protect distressed home owners from predatory and irregular banking practices that were resulting in wholesale foreclosures and lowered neighborhood property values ("We Support the Homeowner Bill of Rights" 2012). The petition was created in March and garnered a modest 2100 signatures over six months that may or may not have influenced California lawmakers in their decision to ratify the bill which became law early in 2013 according to California's official state website. The vast majority of signers—approximately ninety-seven percent—were from California, making the petition far more likely to influence state leaders than if the signers had represented the entire world. It does not require wild speculation to assume that elected officials are likely to take actions that ensure the support of their voters. While corporations attend to their global image, elected leaders are more likely to concern themselves only with the needs and opinions of their constituents. This, of course, suggests that petition writers must consider how best to promote petitions so that they reach the audience most capable of influencing their outcomes.

This study sought to determine to what extent financial cost of compliance influences a petition's success. Admittedly, an exact definition of "high cost" or "low cost" is elusive at best. But, in general, this study assumes that any significant outlay or loss of monies as a direct or indirect result of compliance with the petition makes the petition high cost. By this definition, an apology would be low cost as would the rehiring of a wrongfully dismissed low-wage employee because the employee would have to be replaced at more or less the same salary. Likewise, freeing or dropping charges against people wrongfully incarcerated or held for trial would be low cost. By contrast, asking the United States Federal Emergency Management Agency to desist from insuring homes built in flood plains ("FEMA, Stop Prioritizing Construction Over Endangered Whales" 2012) is high cost because of the perceived loss in land values among people forbidden to develop their property. Similarly, a petition that asks that mining not be permitted in the Grand Canyon ("Don't trash the Grand Canyon with uranium mining" 2012) potentially represents a huge loss in income for the corporation that proposes the mining, so that petition would be considered high cost. It is not especially surprising that this study finds that low-cost petitions are much more likely to be successful than high-cost petitions, especially given the profit orientation of the countries to which they were mostly directed. Of the two hundred petitions in the sample, ninety-nine or 49.5 percent were identified as low cost. However, among the successful petitions, fully fourteen out of nineteen—or approximately seventy-four percent were low cost. This article has already looked at a petition written on behalf of Kyle Dowie that features a low-cost request. Another example is a petition that asked the Miami-Dade County police in Florida to arrest the people guilty of abandoning several horses, some of whom starved to death on a remote farm before they were discovered ("Prosecute owners who abandoned dog and horses to their death" 2012). Created in March, that petition was signed by 8,841 people over the next six months.

Cost is certainly a critical factor in petitions written on behalf of wildlife and open spaces. Quite a few of the sample petitions sought protection for endangered species, preservation of natural habitat, or relief from climate change. However, few of these petitions were successful and certainly the high cost of setting aside land that could be developed and the high cost of regulating industry to prevent habitat disruption plays an important part in the success of a wildlife petition. No petition in the sample was more heartfelt than the one that argued for regulation of nitrogen emissions in the range of the Lange's metalmark butterfly. Titled "Don't Let Bay Area Power Companies Poison the Metalmark Butterfly," (2012) this petition drew attention to a chain reaction that threatens the critically endangered metalmark with complete extinction. The Lange's metalmark feeds exclusively on naked-stemmed buckwheat. However, nitrogen emissions from power plants in the butterfly's northern California range function to fertilize invasive weeds that compete with and crowd out the buckwheat. As a result, the butterfly is left with no food source and hovers on the brink of extinction in its only remaining range. The petition asks California's Environmental Protection Agency to impose strict regulations on nitrogen pollution. However, like almost all the wildlife petitions in the sample, this one has enjoyed no success. Clearly, the cost of containing nitrogen pollution could be prohibitively high and would likely be born by for-profit corporations that have little or no passion for wildlife conservation. This petition also demonstrates other problems that, though they fall outside the empirical conclusions of this study, are still worth considering. Perhaps most importantly, the problem of metalmark extinction resists summation in a four- or five-word sound bite. Even the simplest explanation of the butterfly's plight involves the reader who is also the potential signer in understanding a causal chain of events, thereby challenging the attention span of the typical web surfer. The formula for petition writing recommended by Care2.com and based on the site's observations of what makes a petition effective calls for short, 100-150 word descriptions of the problem, short, punchy headlines of no more than nine words in length, and a summation of the problem that uses the "so why" move in the second sentence. For example: "Kyle Dowie worked faithfully at a Hy-Vee grocery store for twenty-five years. So why did the company fire him?" It should be fairly evident that the problems of the Lange's metalmark are not so easily summed up within the "if then, so why" formula. The same is true of many other petitions that can be earmarked as advocating for the environment. The combination of high costs, required legal changes, and the difficulty of reducing science to sound bites definitely lowers such a petition's chances of success.

This study also concludes that petitions featuring asks with well defined boundaries are more likely to succeed than petitions in which the asks are not specific or clearly demarcated. A precise definition of what makes an ask specific and well-defined is elusive, but generally this study regards petitions which simply seek to tell somebody that he or she is wrong, petitions that ask people to tell the truth, and petitions which ask for a range of actions or for cooperation amongst a number of unnamed stakeholders to be unspecific and not well defined. By contrast, petitions that ask for someone to be rehired or for allocation of a specific sum of money to be made or for a numbered bill to be passed or defeated are regarded as specific and well defined. Using these definitions, 136 out of the sample of two hundred--or sixty-eight percent--had well defined asks, but of the petitions deemed successful, eighteen out of nineteen had well defined asks, yielding the conclusion that a well-defined request is more likely to succeed than a less well-defined request. One of the few successful wildlife petitions in the sample was "Free Endangered Cranes from FAA Red Tape" (2012). This petition described the plight of critically-endangered whooping cranes who were stopped mid-migration by the United States Federal Aviation Administration. The cranes had been taught to follow a microlight aircraft and were being escorted to safe winter habitat when the aircraft flyer was grounded on a technicality. The infraction was resolved within a few hours and the cranes flew on into an uncertain future. The petition, which ultimately garnered 170 signatures, may or may not have influenced the outcome. However this petition, which asks only that a last-ditch effort to save the world's remaining cranes not be thwarted, does illustrate the principle of a really specific ask. Any petition that asked for crane habitat to be created or set aside or

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for a crack down on fish farmers who shoot cranes perceived as poaching their livestock would be much less likely to succeed.

There are certainly other factors that influence a petition's success that fall outside the limits of this study and which are worthy of further examination. Anecdotal evidence generated by the petition sampling suggests that the following additional elements can contribute to a petition's success or failure:

- Petitions that name someone who is actually capable of enacting the proposed change are more likely to succeed than petitions that target groups or a range of stakeholders.
- Petitions written by people who live in the same community as the problem outlined by the petition may be better respected than petitions written by someone perceived as an interloper or busy body.
- Clear, factual petitions written in a measured tone may succeed where strident, over-emotional petitions fail, depending on the audience they achieve. In particular, a tone of righteous indignation is preferable to a display of anger. Using clichés or expressing too much emotion runs the risk that the petition will be turned into a joke.
- All other things being equal, a petition that features a wronged innocent is more likely to succeed, but only if potential signers see the championed subject as entirely blameless. For example, petitions that feature kittens or children generally gain more traction than others. Petitions that champion someone who is morally ambiguous, even if he/she was very ill-treated are less likely to be successful. Badly treated prisoners or child support dodgers, for example, are harder to rally support for.

The role of social media in promoting petitions falls outside the limits of this study, chiefly because it might be impossible ever to quantify how a petition moves virally through the internet. Having said that, however, effective promotion is probably the single most important factor in a petition's success. There are many ways a petition can be promoted on the internet, some more effective than others. It is worth considering which of these methods are most effective and which may not be worth any significant investment of time.

Posting to one's social media pages, like Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn is a time-honored method of getting one's ideas in the cloud, but its effectiveness may be far exaggerated. The most promising way to do this appears to be Facebook for Journalists which provides specific tools for journalists to present their work. Anyone with a large enough group of followers on Facebook or other social media sites can post petitions to that site and hope that friends and followers of the site will take action. Little information exists, however, concerning the degree of efficacy of such methods of dissemination. Also, petition writers must contend with the possible perception that they are "spamming" their friends or using social media for some purpose other than was intended. We are all probably aware of the shared perception of people who forward a lot of emails to everyone in their lists. To a lesser extent, people in one's social profile network may feel imposed on if they are presented with a number of requests for social action.

Posting to discussion groups is among the recommendations made by Care2.com for petition promotion. By far the most effective discussion group to post a petition link to is the discussion that follows many on-line news articles. For instance, a popular on-line newspaper, the *Huffington Post*, almost always allows fairly free discussion in the space below each article. Only rarely are these discussions disallowed and they are rarely censored. I had some success in posting petition links to these Huffington Post discussion groups. Success, here, was modest, however, and likely resulted in up to twenty signatures

for any single petition. It is impossible to assess exactly how much influence such posts had, but no posts to the *Huffington Post* were accompanied by a significant surge in petitions in the forty-eight hours after the post was uploaded.

One serious problem with posting petition links to news article discussions is that most news publishers remove or prohibit any links that lead away from their own site. Clearly, the publishers consider their product a for-profit endeavor and will defend that product against links that advertise other products. Even though a petition does not sell a product, it can still be argued that clicking on a petition takes a user away from the news site and to another site. The user then may or may not return to the news site.

A further method of promoting a petition is emailing it to people in one's email address book, but this method also has severe limitations. Friends and relatives who are not united by a core of political beliefs and a specific commitment to social action may be happy to sign one petition, but feel abused if they are confronted with a second one to sign. Petition writers must also anticipate that even like-minded friends and activists may, for one reason or another, resent receiving a petition signature request. For example, one of my university colleagues sent me an email requesting that I take her "off my list" in the wake of being sent a petition. The fact that she had felt free to send me an unsolicited copy of her book did not deter her from thinking that I was abusing her good nature. Even "Cal," a gentleman who accepted my friend request at the Care2.com site and who regularly emails me with links to articles and actions he cares about has now programmed his email to reject all my emails.

A much more effective method of dissemination is email distribution to a list of people who have voluntarily identified themselves as sharing a core set of beliefs *and* willing to participate in democracy by signing petitions. Over a period of many years, Care2.com has compiled an email list of people globally who identify with a political agenda that can be loosely described as liberal and progressive. People join this list voluntarily by creating an account at the website. As of this writing, Care2.com claims to have over 20 million members. How the company makes use of this email list is proprietary information to which I have no access, but anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that petitions within this study's sampling that were promoted by way of this list almost always garnered more signatures than those that were not so promoted.

In conclusion, on-line petitions will no doubt continue to play an important part in political and social movements alongside other social media. They can be effective, but their efficacy should not be exaggerated. Petition writers should consider how their petition is written and, in particular, what it asks for, of whom, and what the cost of compliance will be. A single petition by itself is unlikely to effect important change, but aligned with other actions, both virtual and on-ground, it is a promising tool for activists and others who seek to shape a better world.

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