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Electronic activism is stirring a lot of citizens into life, whatever leaders think

WHATEVER might unite or divide them, George Bush, Vladimir Putin and the other leaders of the G8 nations will have a fresh topic for small talk, and perhaps serious talk, when they meet in Germany this summer.

They and their underlings will all have been bombarded with e-mails from every country in the world urging them to take faster action over climate change—in a campaign mounted by *Avaaz.org*, a new web-based protest movement which aspires to be the biggest and broadest such organisation in a crowded field.

The newly founded movement claims to have nearly 1m members already, after pooling resources from three of the world's most successful mobilisers of e-protest: America's *Moveon.org* (which gave important help to some Democrats in last year's congressional election), *Res Publica* (an American-based, but globally-minded advocacy movement which often reflects the "religious left") and Australia's *GetUp.org.au*, which has used billboards and sky-writing as well as e-mails to campaign for things like refugee rights and the release of an Aussie (arrested in Afghanistan in 2001) from Guantánamo Bay.

As television viewers in Berlin, Delhi, Paris and Washington, DC will have noticed in recent days, *Avaaz.org* has chosen global warming as the focus of its first big campaign. It has paid for TV advertisements which show George Bush, Vladimir Putin and Jacques Chirac lying fast asleep while evidence of climate change swirls all around them. Viewers are invited to visit the *Avaaz* site and push the necessary button to give the world leaders a deafening wake-up call.

Ricken Patel, the Canadian-British director of *Avaaz*—a name which means "voice" in several languages—says one of the intentions is to act as a lightning rod during "moments of global consciousness" such as the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks or the 2004 tsunami. He cites the battle against AIDS, curbs on landmines and poor-world debt forgiveness as issues on which the thinking of the powerful has already been swayed by grass-roots activism, much of it electronically co-ordinated.

But there are catches, aren't there? As the e-protest movement grows broader, its focus will surely become less sharp. After all, everyone can agree that governments should "do more" about climate change, but when it comes to choosing between specific responses it may be harder to teach the world to click in perfect harmony.

And there is no reason to assume that global e-campaigns will always be mounted in "progressive" causes: what about e-movements for the death penalty, or for more curbs on immigration? But the founders of *Avaaz* do have at least one argument on their side. Voters' faith in old-fashioned parties is at a low ebb in many democracies. One of the proudest boasts by *GetUp*, the Australian movement, is that it has more members than any of the country's parties have signed-up members. E-protest may or may not disrupt the sleep patterns of world leaders; but it has already made life more interesting for hundreds of thousands of jaded citizens.

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