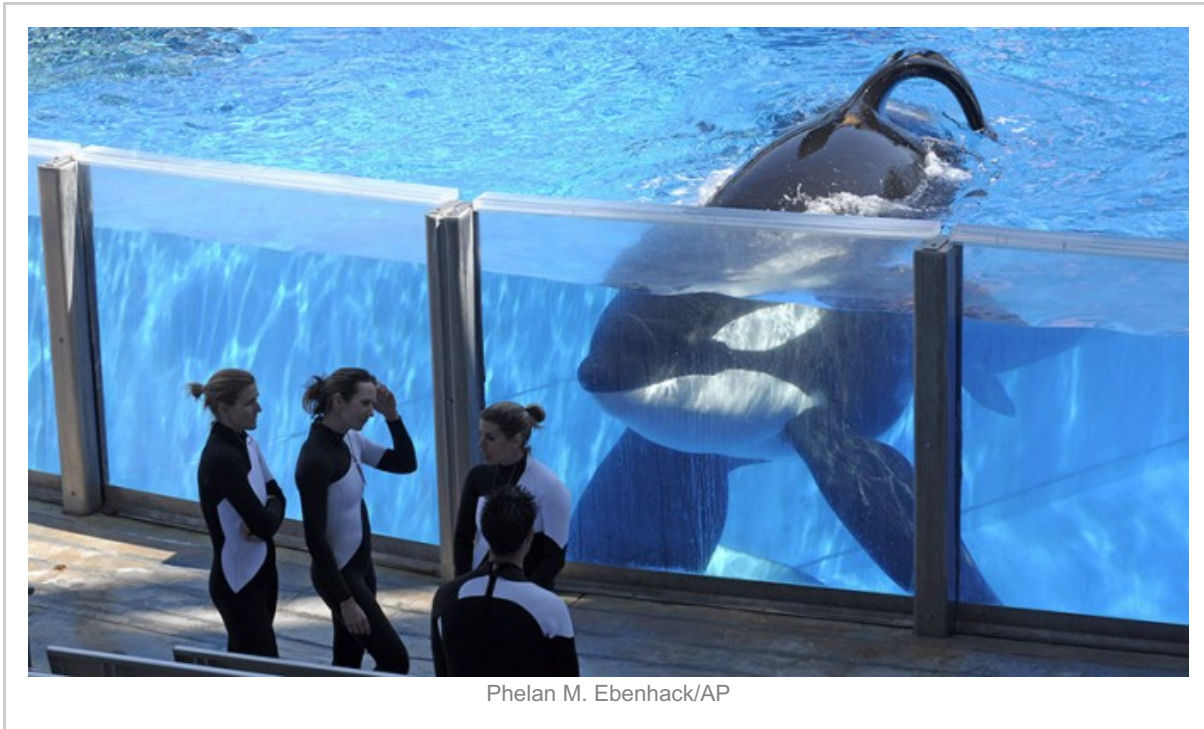


Armchair activists have rarely been so numerous—or powerful

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At about 5 p.m. on a Sunday late last November, Mike Garrett sat down at his computer and wrote out a [222-word petition](#) calling on the Barenaked Ladies to cancel its appearance at the Bands, Brew & BBQ concert at the Orlando location of SeaWorld. The marine mammal park is known for its choreographed displays of lumbering orca whales, and Garrett, an animal rights advocate from St. Catharines, Ont., was saddened that his favourite band would be playing there.

“We have supported BNL from its most humble beginnings and continue to endorse you as honourable representatives of our fun, creative, compassionate and caring Canadian spirit; however we now ask that you please not support the cruelty that exists at captive marine mammal facilities,” Garrett’s petition read, in part. It also included a link to the website for Blackfish, a highly critical documentary about the treatment of orcas at SeaWorld.

Garrett posted his text on [Change.org](#), the San Francisco-based online petition site. He then shut off his computer, had some dinner and went to bed soon after. “I wasn’t sure I would get a response,” Garrett, 38, says today. “I never really wrote a petition before. I did not expect it to snowball so quickly, so rapidly.”

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Snowball it did. Three days and 9,739 signatures later, the Barenaked Ladies pulled out of the concert. Garrett declared victory, and Change.org placed a green victory banner on his petition. But the victory didn't end there.

Other petitions popped up on Change.org urging other artists to bow out of the six-week SeaWorld festival. Two weeks after the Barenaked Ladies, country music singer Willie Nelson bowed out of his SeaWorld appearance. Cheap Trick, Heart, Trace Adkins and REO Speedwagon, among others, followed suit. By mid-January, nine of the 11 bands scheduled to play the Bands, Brew & BBQ concert had cancelled. Pat Benatar and the Beach Boys cancelled their appearances at SeaWorld's Busch Garden location. [CNN picked up a story about an elementary school in Malibu cancelling its yearly trip to the marine-themed amusement park.](#) Parent company SeaWorld Entertainment, a publicly traded company with 2013 revenues of \$1.46 billion, was plunged into a months-long public relations disaster from which it arguably has yet to emerge.

The world isn't lacking for causes to get behind. Yet by giving its users the ability to crowdsource their indignation to millions of eyeballs worldwide, Change.org has facilitated the act of protest to the point where a person like Garrett can wreak havoc on a huge corporation from the comfort of his own home. Another example: in November 2012, a Mississippi teen named Sarah Kavanagh started petition on Change.org calling on PepsiCo to cease using brominated vegetable oil, a food additive also known for its flame retardant properties, in its Gatorade products. Two months and 210,000 signatures later, Gatorade stopped using BVO. Kavanagh then launched a similar petition against Coca-Cola's PowerAde. Last week, both Coca-Cola and PepsiCo announced they were removing BVO from the ingredients of all their products.

With some 2.5 million Canadian users, Canada has among the highest per-capita Change.org participation rate in the world. Change.org petitions have influenced or outright created some of the biggest news stories in the country. A Canadian petition helped free director John Greyson and ER doctor Tarek Loubani after the pair languished in an Egyptian jail for nearly eight weeks last year. A petition started by Nova Scotian Sherri Bain—and signed by nearly 440,000 people—helped an independent review of the police investigation of the alleged rape of Rehtaeh Parsons, who committed suicide. And Prime Minister Stephen Harper and all federal party leaders supported a Change.org petition to nominate Afghan activist Malala Yousafzai for the Nobel Peace Prize. (Yousafzai was nominated in the wake of the petition.)

Yet the platform isn't without its critics, who say Change.org reduces civic engagement to a few clicks on a keyboard. Critics say "slacktivism" or "armchair activism" engenders a sort of mob-rule aspect that, at its worst, can unfairly target individuals and companies.

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Started in 2007 as an online activism platform by Ben Rattray, a Californian educated at Stanford and the London School of Economics, Change.org transitioned to a petition-only platform in 2011. The site made world headlines when a Change.org petition started by the

parents of murdered teen Trayvon Martin helped secure charges against George Zimmerman, his killer. That earned Rattray a spot on Time's 100 most influential people of 2012. Today, the site has offices in 18 countries—and nearly 70 million users across the globe.

The site is an often-cacophonous clearing house for petitions calling for some sort of action in just about every imaginable domain. In Canada alone, there are petitions to “add women from Canadian history to Canadian bank notes”; to have fluoride removed from tap water; to have fluoride added to tap water; to have a “fully independent investigation” into the Senate scandal; to reverse Canada Post's decision to end home delivery; to have Prime Minister Stephen Harper stop “using Sir Paul [McCartney's] beautiful music to humanize his evil robot-man public image.” Some are successes. Most aren't.

Successful campaigns “have two things,” Rattray says. “It has to be specific, for one, and there needs to be good reason to think that a sufficient amount of public attention around an issue can convince a decision-maker to make the choice to change.” David and Goliath narratives seem to work best, which might explain why Garrett's petition was so successful. It spiked the contentious issue of animal rights with a dose of celebrity (Barenaked Ladies) and pitted both against a large, faceless corporate entity. Not coincidentally, animal rights is also one of 10 “cause areas”—criminal justice, environment and immigration are among the others—Change.org tends to promote on its site. In Garrett's case, Change.org staff contacted him to help in the PR push for the petition, and emailed the petition to site users who had signed animal rights petitions in the past.

“We look at things that are most popular, that are trending, that people are interested in, and some things that are already taking off in the media or that have an appeal to a wide audience that the media might want to cover,” says Rattray. “Those are the ones where we'll reach out to the petition creator and make sure that they're using the tool most effectively.”

According to a 2012 report by digital media research firm eMarketer, Canadians' use of social media is well above the global average, which Rattray says helps explain why change.org has done so well here. “I think there's a real sort of passion and appetite for participation [in Canada]. A lot of places in Western Europe that have had a tradition of offline activism are less rapidly adopting what's happening online. But in Canada we've seen people coalesce from social media to activism relatively easily.”

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Despite its righteous image, Change.org isn't a non-profit company. It is a “B Corporation,” a certification for for-profit companies that adhere to a do-no-harm-style “declaration of interdependence.” A B Corporation must, among other things, “act with the understanding that we are each dependent upon another.” Change.org makes money through advertisements on sponsored petitions; its 2012 revenues were \$15 million; since then, the company has stopped releasing its financial data. Last year, the site received a \$15-million grant from Omidyar Network, a philanthropic investment firm that invests mostly in for-profit companies “that catalyze economic and social change,” according to its website.

Last summer, a petition went up on Change.org calling on concert organizers in Halifax to cancel an appearance by R&B singer Chris Brown, who in 2009 pleaded guilty to domestic abuse charges relating to the beating of his girlfriend, fellow R&B star Rihanna. Change.org sent out the petition to users who had previously backed women's rights campaigns on the site; it was deemed a success when Brown cancelled the Halifax concert and other Canadian dates due to "health issues."

It's a fraught situation. Brown's behaviour was abhorrent, no doubt. Yet he is hardly the first music star with a dubious criminal past to be booked in Canada—though his case, unlike most, was subject to intense media scrutiny. "I think the episode with Chris Brown is just another iteration of the Internet's hive/mob mentality. It can rally and unify people like never before, but it has a dark side," says Jeff Roberts, a New York-based law and policy reporter for the tech site GigaOm. "I can say that those sites give causes, and even politics in general, an ephemeral quality similar to the Internet as a whole. The era of viral content means it's possible to attract a million people to a cause faster than any time in history, with the catch that they will lose interest faster than ever before."

Like Mike Garrett, Sherri Bain witnessed the Change.org phenomenon from behind her computer. Bain was incensed that the RCMP investigation into Rehtaeh Parsons' alleged rape didn't result in any arrests, even though the alleged rapists were well known. She began a petition urging the Nova Scotia government to call an inquiry into the RCMP investigation. Six days and some 440,000 signatures later, the Nova Scotia government called an inquiry. While critics say Change.org facilitates mob rule, Bain says her petition actually helped prevent it. The Internet group known as Anonymous had gathered information on the suspects, and had threatened to go public with it. In the end, it didn't.

"If the petition had not garnered the attention and support of thousands, in such a short period of time, with close to immediate results, I do believe more people would have wanted the boys exposed," Bain says. "Without more constructive and positive means to address the issue, people would have likely tried to find justice for Rehtaeh themselves, and more would have supported Anonymous and their threats to reveal the identity of the boys."

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Certainly, SeaWorld found out Change.org is a force to be reckoned with. SeaWorld spokesperson Fred Jacobs said Garrett's campaign was the first time the company had faced what he called "digital harassment" that bullied the bands to drop out. "It seems likely that [the bands] didn't care for the type of harassment they were receiving on social networks from animal rights advocates," Jacobs said.

Though greatly diminished in size, the Bands, Brew & BBQ festival proceeded with Kid Rock and Alan Jackson as headliners. SeaWorld's PR nightmare, however, has yet to subside.

SeaWorld Entertainment recently reported a 13 per cent drop in its attendance in the first quarter of 2014—a victory for animal rights groups, who credited both Blackfish and the pressure brought by Change.org petitions like Garrett's. Three states are now reportedly

considering legislation banning captive-animal parks such as SeaWorld. Armchair activists have rarely been so numerous—or powerful.