



## David and Goliath Revisited: Grassroots Consumer Campaign Battles a Corporate Giant

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### Abstract

When loyal consumers of Crown Pilot crackers discovered that Nabisco had ceased production of their beloved product, citizen lobbying began to pressure the corporation to reverse its decision. This case study analyzes this consumer grassroots campaign as an embodiment of a "new social movement." In addition, the use of new communication technologies that helped to create, sustain, and enhance the lobby efforts is explored. The article traces the history of the Crown Pilot and analyzes communicative strategies employed to reverse a corporate giant's decision. While the passion of campaign organizers and consumers for the cracker was of paramount importance, the analysis also sheds light on a complex interplay of factors that coalesced, saving this product from extinction.

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"I don't want other people thinking for me. I want my Junior Mints! Where did Junior Mints go in the movie? I don't want a 12 lb. Nestles Crunch for 25 dollars. I want Junior Mints. We need more fruitcakes in this world! Less Bakers! We need people that care! I'm mad as hell and I don't want to take it anymore!"

[Jimmy Buffet \(1994\)](#)

"My heart is broken, I shall fly this coup!  
No pilot crackers for my tomato soup?  
What gives Nabisco, you've let me down!  
Where is my favorite cracker, Crown?"

[Gainor Ventresco \(1997\)](#)

Crown Pilot, "The Famous Chowder Cracker," is a product based on hardtack that sailors took on sea voyages. And the history of the Crown Pilot itself proves a fascinating story. Although produced by Nabisco for more than two centuries (Nacelewicz, 1997), until recently these crackers were only sold in a three state region of New England (Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire). But the cracker's long history almost came to an abrupt end when Nabisco merged with R.J. Reynolds in the largest corporate union of the 1980s "merger mania" (Lowenstein, 1995), and evaluated its product line. This evaluation resulted in the discontinuation of several products, including the Pilot cracker.

Of course, products are born and products die every day. So, what is notable about the story of the Crown Pilot? Bottom line business sense suggests that a small, "niche" product does little to line the pockets of corporate America; thus, halting manufacturing seems logical. After all, what is one cracker, a small regional product, to an "8.8 billion (dollar) multinational food business marketing products in 85 countries?" (Nabisco, 1997).

The Crown Pilot story is most notable because the product was resurrected based on the actions of consumers upset by Nabisco's decision to kill the cracker. Research has tended to over emphasize large political movements and overlook social movements surrounding changes in everyday life (Gusfield, 1979, 1994). "Social historians have been telling us ... these, too, are very much part of history" (Gusfield, 1994, p. 75). Despite the lack of research attention to everyday movements, Hamel, Lustiger-Thaler, and Maheu (1999) assert that grassroots citizen action frequently occurs. As Farrell (1993) suggests, there is much to be learned in studying the "pedestrian," much can be gained by examining both "small successes and noble failures" (p. 276). Given that rhetoric is a "practical art" (Farrell, 1993, p. 276), the tool of the trained diplomat and the everyday citizen, the literature is haunted by a bias toward focusing on the former and excluding the latter.

The purpose of this study is to examine a consumer grassroots campaign from its inception to its completion and address its success from a communication perspective. In particular, we explore "new social movements" as a useful perspective from which to analyze communication campaigns, with special interest in the role of new communication technologies. The first section of the paper provides a framework by reviewing key literature related to the study focus. The second section traces the evolution of the Crown Pilot cracker. The third section provides an analysis of communication strategies. The final section discusses the implications and limitations of this project.

### Literature Review

Certainly, the decision to cease production of Crown Pilot crackers is not unusual. Every year corporate America turns out a barrage of product innovations that end on the trash heap. From the sublime (parsnip chips) to the ridiculous (rabbit jerky) and the downright silly (aerosol mustard), many new product concepts are killed shortly after their introduction to the marketplace, never to return (Anthony, 1996; Lukas, 1998). For example, a yellow carbonated beverage called "Tea-Whiz" proved to be a huge failure for Nestea, one of the nation's most popular beverage brands, while Miller Clear Beer and Gerber adult meals also bombed (Lukas, 1998). Even famed products of yesteryear, such as Burma Shave, Geritol, Doan's Pills, and Contact, vacated store shelves without restocking (Staten, 1998). Indeed in most instances, the discontinuation of a product, like 7-Up Lip Balm, barely prompts a whisper of objection, let alone inspires citizens to organize a protest movement. But in the case of Crown Pilot, citizens did band together fueling a movement demanding the return of their beloved product.

### New Social Movements

Emerging as a theory to understand post-World War II collective action, new social movements offers much to the study of communication and campaigns. As Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield (1994) explain: "traditions of the past, perhaps colored by their particular ideological lenses, did not grasp the everyday and identity dimensions of the 'old movements' they sought to explain" (p. 28). New social movements emerge around symbolic, cultural, or community issues of identity rather than economic or class-based ones (Johnston, Laraña, & Gusfield, 1994; Koopmans & Duyvendak, 1995; Melucci, 1985, 1989, 1994). Instead of centering in class-based relationships, the issues of new social movements tend to be rooted in the production of critical resources (Melucci, 1994).

The concern of new social movements centers on the idea that the "'good life' as defined and sanctioned by modern values ... is threatened by the blind dynamics of military, economic, technological, and political rationalization; and that there are no sufficient and sufficiently reliable barriers within dominant political and economic institutions" (Offe, 1985, p. 853). Areas of life that were "traditionally regarded as private (the body, sexuality, affective relations), or subjective (cognitive and emotional processes, motives, desires) or even biological (the structure of the brain, the genetic code, reproductive capacity) now undergo social control and manipulation" (Melucci, 1994, p. 101). Modernization processes and structural changes have gradually erased the dividing line between personal affairs and the public domain, between the individual and powerful organizations. According to Melucci (1980), modern structures encroach on everyday life, and scholars must devote research attention to studying "the problems of everyday life, of relations, and of the

unconscious" (p. 224).

New social movements theory draws from Habermas's (1970) concept of *life-world invaded*. Habermas contends that increased invasion of the private lives of individuals by the corporation and the state unintentionally triggers collective resistance. Such collective resistance relies upon the development of a collective identity forged from common cultural experiences (Downtown & Wehr, 1991). These common experiences may include everyday activities such as personal problems and managing careers. For example, the common experience of having your favorite TV show or food product cancelled may forge unique bonds among consumers.

Although a number of scholars discuss qualities of new social movements, Johnston et al. (1994) summarize eight such characteristics. First, new social movements are not tied to social class structures. As such, their grievances do not represent economic or class-based interests. Second, they comprise a plethora of values, not an overarching ideology. Traditional movements were characterized by ideological stance, but new social movements typically arise around civil, rather than political, dimensions of life. Third, they serve to generate new or revitalize existing identity linkages. "They are associated with a set of beliefs, symbols, values, and meanings related to ... belonging to a differentiated social group; with the members' image of themselves; and with new, socially constructed attributions about the meaning of everyday life" (Johnston et al., 1994, p. 7). Fourth, there is a blurred relationship between the individuals and the group; thus, results often occur via "individual action rather than through or among mobilized groups" (Johnston et al., 1994, p. 7). According to Melucci (1980), there is a strong emphasis on direct participation and a rejection of representation by others.

Fifth, new social movements "often involve personal and intimate aspects of human life" (Johnston et al., 1994, p. 8), facets of daily living, such as clothes, food, and work. Melucci (1980) asserts that, "sexuality and the body, leisure, consumer goods, one's relationship to nature - these are no longer loci of private rewards but areas of collective resistance" (p. 219). According to Offe (1985), "dominant issues of new social movements consist in the concern with ... 'life world,' such as ... the neighborhood, city, and the physical environment; the cultural, ethnic, national, and linguistic heritage and identity ..." (p. 829). Sixth, the tactics of mobilization and disruption of new social movements differ from those used in earlier working class movements. Movement proponents employ available resources and structures considered favorable to their goals, including new communication technologies (Hamel, Lustiger-Thaler, & Maheu, 1999). Seventh, their form and growth is linked to a "credibility crisis of the conventional channels for participation in Western democracies" (Johnston et al., 1994, p. 8). Melucci (1980) suggests that such movements do not tend to focus on the political system and "have been reproached for insisting upon the immediate satisfaction of their demands and for their lack of an overall strategy" (p. 220). Eighth, new social movement organizations "tend to be segmented, diffuse, and decentralized" (Johnston et al., 1994, p. 8).

Like campaigns, new social movements designate a target audience and intend a specific outcome. However, campaigns include a preplanned set of communication activities. Such organized activity is evident in message production and distribution, which now may include both conventional methods and nontraditional communication modes as well as multiple channels (Myhre & Flora, 2000). The campaign organization "assumes major responsibility for selecting and creating or coordinating the channels through which the messages will be disseminated" (Rogers & Storey, 1987, p. 821). In contrast, new social movements tend to arise spontaneously and tend to be decentralized. Thus, such movements with their associated new means of mobilizing the citizenry, fostering identity linkages, promoting decentralized power, and embracing individual action provide a rich area for communication analysis.

### Grassroots Protests

With the increased development of networked communication conduits like the Internet, grassroots activists eager to get their message to the public are able to bypass traditional media outlets and simultaneously use these new media as internal communication tools (Goff, 1996; Henderson, 1995).

Although space considerations prohibit an extensive review of the literature on grassroots movements, here we provide a brief overview of traditional and more recent movements, with special attention devoted to

communication strategy and attempts to revive consumer products.

Given the right circumstances and emotional attachment, citizens will organize to accomplish a goal, such as trying to save a product. Typically, grassroots campaigns are implemented to influence public opinion in order to obtain political or policy-making objectives (Johnson, Miller, Aldrich, Rohde, & Ostrom, 1994). For example, a small, active group of citizens can indeed influence a Congressperson's vote through a diligent letter writing or telephone campaign. At the other end of the spectrum, a larger organization like [American Association of Retired Persons](#) can quickly mobilize its membership to call or write lawmakers when issues like Medicare or Social Security are on the legislative docket.

Traditional grassroots campaigns bubble upward from the populace and neighborhoods, making use of door-to-door communications, telephone calls, and meetings in order to organize and disseminate information. As sophistication of the organization increases, more tactics are added including direct mail flyers and media events to obtain public relations coverage (Myerson & Young, 1996). Although perhaps most frequent in political matters, grassroots efforts also are employed successfully in a host of other community, social, and civic-oriented campaigns (Conte, 1997; Meeks, 1997). For example, some of the most successful grassroots campaigns have involved efforts to save cancelled television shows.

The advocacy group [Viewers for Quality Television](#) (VQT) started as a small effort by a Virginia woman to return "Cagney and Lacey" to the airwaves. VQT today remains a relatively small organization with about 3,000 members and an annual budget under \$70,000. But its volunteer efforts each year include letter campaigns, a respected newsletter, annual polls, awards, and a national conference, all directed toward preserving quality programming and resurrecting some shows from the network trash heap. Since its formation, VQT campaigns have resulted in the renewal of several programs slated for cancellation, including "Designing Women" and "China Beach." Most recently, fans of the cancelled "Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman" formed their own "Save Our Show Campaign" which included a petition drive and used a Web site to urge viewers to write or call CBS to protest (Dorsey, 1998).

While the cancellation of TV shows can inspire an emotional uprising of grassroots protest among the populace, the removal of most failed products does not evoke such passion. One highly notable case where citizens did protest in mass about a product discontinuation resulted in the reversal of a corporate monolith's decision - Coke's decision to revive Classic Coke.

The public greeted Coca-Cola's decision to produce New Coke, supposedly a better-tasting product, with thousands of phone calls and letters protesting removal of the "old" Coke. Further, the media coverage and public reaction was extensive. Across the letters, phone calls, and comments to the media, individuals reacted as if betrayed by Coca-Cola and "grief-stricken" (Pendergrast, 1993, p. 363).

The corporate blindness stemmed not so much from geography or cultural background as from the 80s mentality ... the new team wanted to repeat the blockbuster breakthrough of Diet Coke. In the process, they overlooked the most vital emotion of all -- love (Pendergrast, 1993, p. 370).

Under pressure from the public and the media, Coke decided to continue producing the original drink. The "second coming" of Coke (i.e., Classic Coke) resulted in so much positive feedback (e.g., letters, phone calls, media attention) that what *Business Week* labeled "the marketing blunder of the decade" became a vast "commercial coup" for Coke (Pendergrast, 1993, p. 366 and 371).

But it is also clear that "the American public loudly and clearly taught the corporate strategists a history lesson" (Pendergrast, 1993, p. 370). The public saw Coke as deeply ingrained in their lives, and they weren't willing to let it be taken away -- at least not without a fight. In his history of Coca-Cola, Pendergrast (1993) includes a section of a letter Coke received lamenting the removal of the old formula:

Whenever things began to look too bleak, I'd come over and pick you up, we'd share a

few minutes together, and I would be comforted. And do you remember the times I and our friends shared concerns when you were around? It seems as if the richest hours of my life have been shared with you (p. 370-371).

## Role of New Technology

Often, individual participants in new social movements may become involved because they believe in the issue even though they are not connected to the organizers by previous relationship or location. In such instances, communication technologies and informal networks can play important roles as disseminators of information. These movements "provide 'new social spaces' where ... like-minded persons seek their own individuality in a complex and often contradictory world" (Johnston, 1994, p. 276). Additionally, new social movements "draw their support in novel ways from across class and regional boundaries" and "place a high value upon grassroots, informal and 'hidden' forms of organization ..." (Keane & Mier, 1989, p. 1). In part the transcendence of traditional boundaries and emergence of new organizational forms is facilitated by rapid development and adoption of new communication technologies.

Becker and Wehner (1998) theorize that interactive media support the development of "partial publics," such as community pressure groups and special interest groups. Information technologies foster a set of broad behavioral influences that seem to factor into the development of these communities. For example, interactive media free users from limitations of "time and space" in that messages can be transported across far distances and can be preserved in time (Rice & Gattiker, 2001; Rogers & Albritton, 1995). The concept of "connectivity" (Williams, Rice, & Rogers, 1987, 1988) refers to one's awareness that one can use the technologies to potentially communicate with individuals or groups. This notion of connection is not at all bound by traditional physical factors in any sense. Connectivity transcends time and exists independent of geographic or other boundaries. For example, a person living in a dense urban area may not feel any greater degree of connectivity than someone in an isolated rural setting. Instead it is the communication technology, or at least access to such technology, that enhances and enables the sensation of connectivity to increase. Developing media are prime examples of technologies that can empower individuals living even in the most remote of locations (Millward, 2000).

The interactive nature of developing technology with its potential to foster discussion and community has prompted the vision of a new form of participatory democracy, where such technologies are a revolutionary means for activism (e.g., Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988; Gurak, 1997; Sclove, 1995). Information technology may increasingly play an important role in rebuilding citizens' sense that they can foster change (Meeks, 1997; Phillips, 1995). Already, for example, new communication technologies are used as a tool for grassroots organization in the political arena. The Internet proved to be a backbone as early as Perot's 1996 presidential campaign (Goff, 1996).

Beyond political issues, Meeks (1997) suggests communication technology will allow for the increasing development of online communities that address a broad array of social issues and problems. Interactive media enable individuals to reach out to others with common interests, develop community, and organize to solve problems, from safety to land planning to volunteer campaign coordination (Conte, 1997). Such grassroots coordination, for example, is taking place in an organization called [KidsCampaigns](#) that uses cyberspace to help make neighborhoods and cities around the nation more "family-friendly." This case is interesting because "community" in the new-fashioned sense is fighting to preserve a part of an old-fashioned community. Also beyond the scope of traditional political campaigns, new communication technology (e-mail, listservs, web sites) played a primary role in the grassroots movement for micro radio (Coopman, 2000a, 2000b). Coopman (2000b) suggests that "instantaneous communication, resource sharing, and the organizational potential of the Internet are foundations of a grassroots Micro Radio Movement that has gone from obscurity to the national arena in less than five years."

## Summary

New social movements, which coalesce around symbolic or cultural issues, offers a useful perspective from which to view citizen campaigns. Given particular circumstances and emotion, citizens will organize in



grassroots efforts to achieve particular goals, such as lobbying against an organization's decision. Although many factors influence the outcomes of such movements, an important area of inquiry is the use of new communication technologies. Such technologies allow individuals to reach out to others with common interests and forging relational bonds is less constrained by issues of time and space.

## Methods

Although many factors play a role in citizen campaigns like the Coke revival and the Micro Radio Movement, our interest centers in communicative characteristics of the Crown Pilot movement and in its use of new media technologies. Our reviews of media coverage, in traditional outlets and on the Web, of this grassroots movement informed our selection of interviewees and the development of interview questions. Participants selected for these in-depth, audio-recorded interviews were: Donna Miller Damon, widely heralded in news stories as the person who spearheaded the cracker campaign, Beverly Johnson, who developed and maintained the Crown Pilot Web Page, and a representative of Nabisco, who was close to the internal decision making and asked to remain anonymous. In the next section, we provide historical background and information on the Pilot campaign. Then, we present the results of our analysis.

## The History of the Crown Pilot Cracker

### The Beginning of the Crown Pilot Cracker

The Crown Pilot cracker has a lengthy history -- one as rich as fans claim its addition to their chowder is. Crown Pilot can be traced to "hardtack" or "ship's biscuit," "unsweetened, unleavened crackers" which stored well and thus became relied upon to provide nourishment during lengthy sailings (Nabisco, 1997). When returning from the sea, sailors brought their attachment to hardtack ashore (Damon, 1996a).

First called "Pilot Bread" and produced by John Pearson in Massachusetts (Nabisco, 1997), these crackers became dietary staples across the New England coast (Damon, 1996b). For generations, "consumers enjoyed them in stew and chowders, spread with jam and soaked in milk; babies even teethed on them" (Nabisco, 1997).

Prior to mass production, community bakeries served regional areas with products catering to the cultural cuisine (Damon, 1996a). In the late 1800s, Pearson joined a group of bakeries which became the National Biscuit Company, known as Nabisco today (Nabisco, 1997). As larger companies were formed, the links to regional roots became more distant. And as smaller companies were incorporated into larger ones, often products deemed less profitable were dropped from production (Damon, 1996a). Alternately, sometimes such products were retained to compete with other small companies, who in several cases were ultimately forced to close. Often after such closures, the larger company would discontinue producing the product, even if it was a popular one in some regional areas (Damon, 1996a). Eventually, Nabisco was the sole producer of the Pilot cracker and sold the product only along a three state coastal region.

### The Ending of the Crown Pilot Cracker

In May of 1996, Nabisco decided to discontinue producing the Crown Pilot cracker (Nabisco, 1997). Having been produced for 204 years (Nacelewicz, 1997), the Crown Pilot was Nabisco's "longest-running product" (Corey, 1997, p. 1A). However, no mass announcement was made to alert New Englanders to the discontinuance (Damon, 1996a).

According to the Nabisco interviewee, Crown Pilot crackers were not selling. "This, for us, was simple arithmetic ... it had a very limited distribution and even there nobody was buying it." This interviewee said that Nabisco's:

product portfolio ... consisted of a number of very well known, top selling ... brands like

Oreo, Chips Ahoy, and Ritz, but also contained quite a large number of very small, little known ... businesses that did not ... amount to a significant contribution to profits ... We discontinued a lot of products that were essentially very small sellers and were pretty much regional players. This is a fairly consistent food theme that you see in American food companies in the 90s ... Every food company has done this at least once and most have done it more than once - just since 1995.

In analyzing products, the Nabisco representative maintained:

There were a lot of different ways that products got on that list. And, of course, one was if they did not sell well, and another was if ... they were not particularly profitable. Another way would be if they were confined to a small geography, and then others were just a pain in the neck to make. Crown Pilot was all of those.

Crown Pilots were produced at only one of Nabisco's bakeries and workers there:

would pull the equipment out on a weekend and set it up and run a few batches which would last for months. But then the cleaning and that process of having to set up fairly antiquated machinery ... was such a pain in the neck ... the bakery was thrilled.

When Pilot crackers became scarce on the grocery shelves, New Englanders assumed this phenomenon was temporary. They waited for the next delivery shipments, unaware of product decisions made by Nabisco (Damon, [1996a](#)).

### **A New Beginning for the Crown Pilot Cracker**

In the nine-month period after the discontinuance, Donna Miller Damon, a resident of [Chebeague Island](#) and Pilot loyalist, spearheaded a grassroots campaign resulting in newspaper, magazine, radio, and television coverage. This coverage, including "NPR," "CBS Sunday Morning," *The Boston Globe*, and *Yankee Magazine*, and other Crown Pilot information (e.g., recipes, poetry, e-mails) was chronicled on the [Crown Pilot Web page](#), developed by Beverly Johnson, another Chebeague Island resident. And during this same time period, Nabisco received a plethora of telephone calls, e-mails, and letters (Nabisco, [1997](#)). Overwhelmingly, these communiqués told of the place and importance of the Crown Pilot in people's lives and called for the cracker's return:

I am a life long chowder and soup eater. The pleasure of soup is one of the great foods of the world ... and is beyond description when you consider the health and nutritional benefits, as well as, the sensuous pleasure of making and then consuming a hot bowl of soup on a cold wintry day or a cold soup in mid-August. So, now Nabisco has pulled the Crown Pilot cracker off the shelves! What am I supposed to do with those measly mealy little oyster crackers that are left? I say LONG LIVE THE CROWN PILOT! A response announcing the Crown's return to the shelves of every local market is expected forthwith! (Richard Steele, letter to Nabisco, <http://web.nlis.net/~bjohnson/crownpilot.html>)

Much like the public displays after the cancellation of "old" Coke (Pendergrast, [1993](#)), Crown Pilot loyalists were willing to profess their love for the cracker and its meaning in their lives.

At first, the calls, e-mails, and letters to Nabisco were just from the New England coast. The Nabisco interviewee said, "We weren't really surprised, but we, at that point, had no intentions of changing our minds. Then, the publicity hit and the publicity was very negative." Ultimately, the CBS and other national coverage:

awakened a lot of sentiment, not only in that region, but around the country ... after that

program (CBS) aired ... the calls increased exponentially and we began also getting a tremendous amount of mail, including bulk e-mail and regular mail.

Beverly Johnson, who developed the Web site, called Damon "the Crown Pilot Queen," and said, "You really do need someone like Donna Damon to get at it." But according to Damon, she didn't plan a full-fledged campaign:

I think it was a myth in that the way it was presented by the media was that this was a grassroots, almost get out the vote, kind of idea. How it really started was just me writing an article in the column that I write on a regular basis. And I just happened to hit something that peaked a lot of interest. Even though a whole lot of people were concerned about it and even though I ended my clincher in the article with "call 1-800-Nabisco," the intent wasn't to start a giant campaign.

I came home one night ... he (her husband) said, "You had a call from CBS." I said, "Yeah, right." I thought it was a joke.

But Johnson said, "She's (Damon) the island historian and she has more crusades than anyone can imagine. She's always on another crusade to help people, to help the island."

Damon said her initial article was prompted by a need to do something about her parents' complaints about the lack of crackers:

My family had been fishermen for hundreds of years, and when I was a kid ... my father would go fishing and he would get fish and hang them on a clothesline, dry them out. And Sunday nights we would have salt fish, and Pilot crackers, and milk. I knew that for them that was really important, and a lot of their friends. But really, this is what they had, and still have every Sunday night. It was really something that meant something to people. Because I write for ... a coastal newspaper, I figured it would probably touch other people too. That was the motivation ... I thought it was something that really would affect a lot of other people... I was writing to my audience.

This anticipated effect on other people, emphasized in Damon's stories, ultimately fueled this new social movement, resulting in Nabisco's eventual decision to resurrect the cracker.

## Analysis

### Crown Pilot as a New Social Movement

In crafting her articles and shaping those of others, Damon focused on the cultural aspects of Maine life. And cultural issues are the stuff of which new social movements are made (Melucci, 1980; Offe, 1985). In this case, Damon's communicative efforts changed a potentially silly story to something big. The central theme in the news stories was the Crown Pilot's place as "an important part of New England's cultural heritage. The more she thought about it, she (Damon) said, the more she felt angry at Nabisco's willingness to sacrifice tradition for the bottom line" (Nacelewicz, 1997, p. 1B). Examining campaign rhetoric, Duffy (1997) notes "explanations of events can never be neutral; they are always organized to present events from a certain perspective and they invite others to share that perspective" (p. 129). Damon's perspective was contagious and became shared enough to ignite this new social movement.

Damon's initial hook caught hold, with the Web page, emails, and press articles perpetuating the cultural angle. For example stating "the first sale of the Pilot crackers can be traced back to 1792, three years after George Washington became president" (Holmstrom, 1996, p. 15) and "Pilot crackers are a comfort food which evokes as many feelings as motherhood and apple pie" (Damon, 1996a), news articles showed a product shrouded in history and culture, allegiance and nostalgia. Although companies throughout the U.S.



may downsize product offerings, "rarely does a corporate ax obliterate an important element of the culture of an entire region" (Damon, [1996b](#)). "But National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) did just this when it opted to stop production of Pilot crackers, the Sunday night staple of coastal New England" (Damon, [1996a](#)). "More than crackers will be disappearing. An important link to culinary history will end" (Holmstrom, [1996](#), p. 15). The foothold Damon wanted had been established.

Perhaps most importantly Damon's hook was not simply a convenient "hanger" for a story - rather it was her life, her experience, and the life and experience of her family and friends. According to Griffin ([2000](#)), "narratives may play a much more fundamental role in structuring social movements than has yet been acknowledged" (p. 76). Through narrative, members of the movement "are sustained, encouraged, and guided," and "converts" and "sympathizers" are brought in because they link the story to their lives (Griffin, [2000](#), p. 76). In the largest sense, a social movement reveals itself to the world in story form, complete with a moral compass and a purposive destination (Griffin, [2000](#)). Damon's narrative resonated with New Englanders and easily drew in sympathetic others, meeting both Fisher's ([1987](#)) conditions for "narrative probability" and "narrative fidelity."

Throughout the growing mass of interested persons and the media coverage, an "us versus them" mentality had been defined and injustice had been established, two key elements of successful story structuring (Gamson, [1990](#); McCarthy, [1994](#)). According to Hunt, Benford, and Snow ([1994](#)), social movements face three essential framing tasks: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. Diagnosis involves pinpointing a problem to ameliorate and the responsible parties. It specifies "culpable agents" with "role identities of villain, culprit, or antagonist" (p. 191). Damon's initial stories diagnosed the problem, identifying Nabisco as the culprit, and the opinions of movement supporters and orientation of subsequent news stories reinforced this diagnosis, serving to fuel wide acceptance of these views. Prognosis posits a plan for rectification, including actions for specific parties. Nearly every Crown Pilot story and every email or phone call to Nabisco clearly outlined the solution: Nabisco was to bring the cracker back to its loyal fans. Motivation centers in getting people involved -- the rationale for why people should join the cause. The news and human interest angles in the Crown Pilot coverage garnered support by resonating widely and "crosscutting identities" (McCarthy, [1994](#), p. 134).

The story, depicted as a cultural issue, showed people in their own locale, missing their favorite cracker. As Damon explained:

I think people thought of it as more than food. It was part of their culture. It had memories with it, so it was more than just eating it. It was the meaning behind it.

Damon suggested people were enthused about the campaign because it ignited passion. She received a large number of letters and notes, both through regular mail and e-mail, that indicated how focused individuals were about this single issue because of their past experiences with Crown Pilots. Damon said:

In the memories they wrote, it was like motherhood and apple pie, which is one of the things I didn't realize. I thought, that was one of the surprises for me, is for the memories these things bring back.... one person from a lake in Maine wrote me and told me about when he was a little boy. He and his brother used to take their pontoon out, their little rowboat out on the lake. They would go fishing and they would lay out in the sun and eat cucumber sandwiches made with Pilot crackers. It was story after story.

And across the stories, person after person related their "love" for the product and its meaning in their lives, much akin to the outcry about Coke (Pendergrast, [1993](#)). The interviewee at Nabisco echoed these sentiments: "The sheer emotion that was being attached to the product is not something that marketers see everyday. They rarely see passion attached to a consumer product."

Using a cultural orientation as its backdrop, this grassroots movement possesses all eight new social movement characteristics posited by Johnston et al. ([1994](#)). The movement drew support from people across

all walks of life, ranging from those who make their living teaching to those who make their living fishing. Although the epicenter of the movement was in Maine, people as far away as Hawaii, Florida, and California felt the energy. Four of Johnston et al.'s (1994) new social movement characteristics were especially influential in the communicative aspects of the Crown Pilot cracker movement: generating and revitalizing identity, blurring individual and group relationships, focusing on aspects of personal life, and satisfying demands. We explore each of these below.

### **Generating and Revitalizing Identity**

As previously discussed, the Pilot cracker was deeply rooted in New England culture and a key to development of this new social movement was communicating and then reiterating this vital linkage. Damon stressed:

It had more meaning to it than just food. It made them think about what it was when they were kids. It had memories with it, so it was more than just eating it. It was the meaning behind it.

Participants in the movement shared a number of beliefs, enabling what Melucci (1985) calls "collective identity" to emerge (p. 793).

Further, local talk, regional and national media coverage, and the emerging Internet collective triggered memories, serving to consolidate existing social ties, reinforce identity, and facilitate group bonding. One of Damon's examples conveyed the deep-seated interest of many locals:

Tim Sample (a local reporter and humorist) -- you should talk to him. Get him to tell you about the woman who was up in her eighties and found him in a grocery store parking lot and saw him and called to him and showed him a picture of her eating these crackers when she was a little girl on a wharf. It had reminded her of it, and she found the picture and was carrying it around with her and ran into Tim Sample. He was very moved by that.

This example illustrates the triggering of memories and the spark of identity and identity connections. Beyond tapping into regional identities, this new social movement tapped into storehouses of memory across the nation, memories of history, loved products, individual rights, and New England vacations. As discussed by Fantasia (1988) and Snow and McAdam (2000), the forging of such identity connections almost invariably yields positive emotions and a tendency toward action.

### **Blurring Individual and Group Relationships**

In Gusfield's (1994) view, "the action of the movement has its locus in a multiplicity of events, often that of individuals" (p. 62). Certainly, in this case it was the actions of individuals, not a concerted group effort, which resulted in success. For example, despite some linkages, movement supporters did not band together as a group. In fact, those who took some form of action to bring back the cracker did so through their choice of individual communication action, not because of orchestrated group activities. In Damon's view:

A lot of people were talking about it who were affected by the decision of Nabisco. A lot of people were concerned. It was mostly just people talking and people were calling 1-800-Nabisco. People were doing it individually, just for their own concern. It wasn't a coordinated effort.

Also, various individuals elected to contact other people who might be willing to help.

When seeking a movement's origin, new social movements focus on factors prior to mobilization to

understand the "nonvisible networks that function in everyday life as premobilization structures" (Johnston et al., 1994, p. 25). Damon reveals a small beginning, but within a clear network of supporters:

There was a woman in Southport, Maine, which is a small coastal, it's an island with a bridge, and she had been really upset about it. She had read my articles, and she couldn't believe that it was really true. So, she called Tim Sample, who is a Maine humorist. Tim Sample was picked up a few years ago when Charles Kuralt was on CBS News This Morning. He does a piece called Postcards from Maine. And so, she called him. He was somebody she had known since she was a little kid. And she said, "What are you going to do about this?" So, he called his producer.

Thus, although people were positioned to help in any number of ways, interested individuals decided how and when, as well as even whether, to act to bring them into the movement. And although some suggestions were made (e.g., email or phone Nabisco), primarily individuals chose their own action, not acting in concert with a group.

### **Focusing on Aspects of Personal Life**

This movement was clearly defined to emphasize personal, intimate areas of living. Noting her family's long history fishing the local waters and feasting on Sunday dinners with Pilots, Damon emphasized that she got involved "because of the personal nature of it." In her view, this cause was important not only to her, but also to her parents, their friends, and several people in the region.

Romanticizing [Maine](#) and drawing on the nostalgia of living there, Damon described the story in personal terms and suggested that her communication of such images fueled interest:

Maine has a slogan: "Maine, the way life should be." The whole idea of being on an island, it evokes images in people's minds. Whether they are real or not real, I mean there is an image that all people on the Maine coast live in fishing villages and go lobstering and wear souwesters, and they wear rubber boots. You think of Maine, shut your eyes and think of it, and I think that fits into it. Maybe that's why it (her original news story) was picked when it was read out of the *Island News*, maybe it caught people's attention more than when it was read out of the *Boston Globe*. I don't know. But I definitely think the whole coastal flavor ... When you can say your ancestors have lived in the same place since the 1750s... You can picture this image of people eating Pilot crackers.

Damon also painted scenes others could easily identify with, enhancing romantic views of Maine life:

And the image of a little general store, a mom and pop store that's been in the same family for thirty something years... It looks like what you think it would look like... It all plays into that myth.

Certainly, an interest in preserving history and culture, as well as an interest in sustaining the voices of individuals against corporate decisions, resonated with many across the nation. It likely was the personal nature of the stories comprising this social movement that spurred wide interest. As Johnston et al. (1994) assert, new social movements center in the "arenas of daily life: what we eat, wear, and enjoy; how we make love, cope with personal problems, or plan or shun careers" (p. 8). Nabisco's "delisting" of the Pilot cracker tapped a collective experience of childhood memories, schemata of the New England coast, and the ills of big business. And consistent with Habermas's (1970) notion of *life-world invaded*, collective resistance was triggered.

### **Satisfying Demands**

As noted early in the paper, actors in new social movements often perceive a breakdown in conventional democratic communication channels. In part due to weariness with typically political communication, they tend to function without well-established strategies and simultaneously focus on immediate satisfaction of their demands. For example, individuals involved in new social movements tend to focus on the present task. Their goals are temporary, limited to specific times and places. Melucci (1989) aptly calls these collective actors "nomads of the present."

Certain elements of this position were evidenced in the Crown Pilot movement. For example, nearly every communication to and between movement members, in the press, and to Nabisco, stressed the demand - resume production of the cracker. Additionally, Damon herself acknowledged that the Pilot cracker issue was a temporary interest:

It was kind of entertaining, but it did get old, even for my son. It got old after awhile ... I was going to actually send out a letter to all the people who had written, but I just, I just never, I had to go on with my life. And I just never did get to that.

Apart from the eight characteristics outlined by Johnston et al. (1994), including the four we have selected for elaboration above, this movement also displayed certain other distinctive features of new social movements. For instance, "intergenerational relations are a key aspect of how continuity in culture, ideology, and organizational form is achieved" (Johnston et al., 1994, p. 27). Damon often illustrated such principles in her examples:

I have a cousin who is this real jovial guy, who is really passionate about these. When he was a kid, his father used to make Pilot Crackers in Portland, so he'd be good, and he sings. Then we got my son into it, who wanted to stay home from school and see this. ... And then I had my mother and father, who are way up in their eighties. And they're the ones who got the whole thing going because they kept fighting over, my mother kept saying that if she got to the store she'd find the Pilot Crackers and my father just couldn't find them. And that's how I found out they were discontinued.

Beyond these factors in the development, growth, and maintenance of this new social movement, new communication technologies also played some role.

### **New Communication Technologies and the Crown Pilot Movement**

In this movement, interactive media technologies, at the very least, helped to bring together rather disparate individuals into a "customizable community" (Jones, 1995) as a focused "issue group" (Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988), whose main purpose revolved around resurrecting a cracker. Beverly Johnson, who created the "[Save the Nabisco Crown Pilot Cracker](#)" Web page, said that they realized the campaign might not be the most meaningful; that is, its magnitude may not rival other grassroots movements centering on important political or social issues (Conte, 1997; Meeks, 1997). Still, Johnson insists the movement was emotionally charged:

Some people thought, you know, there were a lot more important issues to begin with rather than whether they bring back Crown Pilot crackers or not. You know like, "if you are going to take on a campaign, make it something that's really got substance and not something that you eat." I do know that maybe people have a point. It was a light, fun thing to do at the time. But it meant a lot to some people.

The Web page emerged as a means not only to disseminate information about the situation, but also as a way to preserve the story over time. The site was an outgrowth of Johnson's work on a Web page about [news on their island](#). In large part, the Crown Pilot Web page became a response to people around the country who were contacting Damon and Johnson about the story with great interest. According to Johnson:

I'd gone on the Internet, searching for any information about Pilot crackers. I think at the time I saw two references regarding recipes but I couldn't find anything. There was nothing on the Nabisco page but I did find an e-mail to send messages to. It seemed like the perfect time to do that (start the Web page)....so I started putting the newspaper articles on the page.

Johnson solicited communication via e-mail from visitors. The subsequent stories and inquiries about Crown Pilot came from the four corners of the nation and virtually everywhere in between. While Johnson and Damon in effect used the Internet and World Wide Web as additional media to get their message out, the technology had a deeper impact. Initially, they may not have realized that these communication technologies would help to mobilize public opinion around the nation, but now they agree that is indeed what happened. The Crown Pilot movement became in one sense a budding "virtual community" (Rheingold, 2000) that was not bounded by geographical ties. Within this "new social space" (Johnston, 1994, p. 276) common in contemporary social movements, geographic boundaries fell and the campaign snow-balled as Johnson put the Web page online. As with the [KidsCampaigns](#) discussed earlier, this newly fashioned community worked to preserve the old-fashioned community. Damon said:

I can't remember how many e-mails she (Johnson) got, but she got a lot from people all over the country. One in particular was from some guy who initially said, "I don't see what the big deal is about it." And she got another one back from him awhile later. He lived in Michigan and his sister had come from New England and brought him a box of Pilot crackers. He wrote her (Johnson) back to say something to the effect of how great they really were.

Johnson took the e-mail that she and Damon received and posted the messages on the Web site. In so doing, she gave visitors a sense of the depth of feelings about the crackers and also revealed how the issue mobilized public opinion, but not just in New England. Johnson related two e-mail examples:

Here's one from Excelsior, Minnesota: I'm glad to hear about your efforts to bring the Pilot cracker back. I was truly amazed when I heard that cracker had been pulled off production and wouldn't be available anymore....I will e-mail Nabisco regularly until they succumb to the pressure. I grew up in Maine and Pilots were a staple of my diet, mostly with chowder but sometimes in the middle of the night with peanut butter. That was my dad's favorite too. Many relatives are in Maine. I visit as often as I can.....it would be better if we knew we could get Pilot crackers when we visit.

Here's a different one from Tide Water Net: Support you. Miss them so much. What is chowder without Pilots? What is lobster stew without Pilots? Bottom line...what is life without Crown Pilots?

The Web page asked visitors to e-mail Nabisco with their sentiments and that is indeed what happened. The Nabisco representative said the company took note of the number of pleas on behalf of the Crown Pilot, but they were especially impressed that sentiment was aroused across the country. Damon suggests the ease of communicating by e-mail helped to mobilize public opinion and let Nabisco know of the displeasure. As noted above, this use of new media technology in the campaign illustrates one dimension of a new social movement. That is, it served to further "blur" the individual/group relationship, with individuals communicating in groups, but acting independently, rather than in concert. Additionally, new social movements are usually diffuse and decentralized. Given the informality of this virtual community and the lack of any real organization per se, especially in terms of a pre-existing entity or continuing one, such as VQT discussed earlier, another element of new social movements is demonstrated.

The magnitude of the online response can be gauged in several ways. Johnson had a sense that the campaign had some degree of "connectivity" (Williams, Rice, & Rogers, 1987, 1988) with others despite their remote geographic location, based on the amount of e-mail they received plus the fact the Web site received several thousand "hits." While the Nabisco spokesperson questions the degree to which the use of this technology had far reaching impact, at a minimum the communication technology allowed for

connections and interaction from those physically disconnected from the main focus of attention. According to Damon, the magnitude of the campaign and the subsequent virtual community that was formed was somewhat surprising to those who took part:

Beverly didn't really realize it was really a big deal until it was over. I mean she did because she had been working on the Web page, but what I mean is it wasn't. Afterwards she said, "I don't know why I didn't believe that." And then my brother...he thought it was so silly and afterwards, you know, they were all thinking, "Oh my gosh, this really was something." The more they read about it, it was funny.

Information technologies, though perhaps only one of several key factors, did help the Crown Pilot movement overcome obstacles that resulted from the remote location of the island. Certainly, coverage by the mass media also was highly important to the success of the movement. As Becker and Wehner hypothesize (1998), this study lends credence to the idea that new media work toward changing public opinion, but in ways that are *supplementary* to existing forms of communication.

Perhaps most important, this study provides further impetus to another emerging sector of developing media research. The Crown Pilot case illustrates that while new interactive technologies may be paving the way for an electronic global village, they are also being used to advance and reinforce local community. As Sandel (1996) noted:

The global media and markets that shape our lives beckon us to a world without boundaries and belonging. But the civic resources we need to master these forces, or at least contend with them are still to be found in the places and stories, memories and meanings, incidents and identities, that situate us in the world (p. 74).

New media can encourage greater community involvement, expand local ties, facilitate cultural preservation and propagation, and develop local identity (Hampton & Wellman, 2000; Hongladarom, 1998). Increasingly, a "rural niche" is developing in cyberspace (Millward, 2000) that can serve important and meaningful functions for an often overlooked sector of an increasingly urban society. In the case of the Crown Pilot, Johnson notes the very nature of rural daily life in a physically small and geographically remote community was also beneficial:

I thought it (the campaign) would be successful. See, living in a small community you don't realize how big things are. I think things seem more doable if you know what I mean. I think if we lived in the city, we wouldn't even bother to try. We are a small community and you just ... like they say, most presidents come from small cities. They don't realize what the obstacles are.

## Summary

During its inception, the Crown Pilot news story was infused with cultural underpinnings. These cultural aspects emerged as an important element of the story as it grew. And through the cultural narrative, more and more individuals were drawn to the movement and bonds were formed. Analysis of this grassroots movement yields several important elements common to new social movements - identity linkages, blurred relationships between individuals and groups, a focus on aspects of personal life, attempts to satisfy demands, and new means of mobilization. In particular, this movement employed new communication technologies in cultivating member relationships. Interactive media technologies served to bring individuals from across the nation together into a "customizable community" (Jones, 1995), whose main purpose revolved around resurrecting the Crown Pilot.

## Conclusions

Beverly Johnson was correct in believing that the campaign would be successful. Nine months after



canceling production of the cracker, Nabisco decided to revive the Crown Pilot (Nabisco, 1997). Although no major announcement was made regarding cancellation, the decision to resume production of Pilot crackers was announced at a press conference in Boston. This effort included a "symbolic" sea voyage with Pilot crackers aboard with donations to historical societies along the route and a chowder and crackers luncheon (Nabisco, 1997). The Crown Pilot was the only product on Nabisco's "cut" list that received any public attention (Flaherty, 1997). Interest was great enough that not only was the Pilot resurrected, but the crackers can now be purchased via Nabisco's 800 telephone number outside the original three state area (Nabisco, 1997). At the time of the interview, the Nabisco representative noted that, due to the volume of requests and slow rate of production, the Pilots were on backorder.

This analysis tracks a grassroots new social movement from its inception to its completion, addressing its communicative successes and the role of new technology. Much can be gained from shedding light on a small, successful campaign waged against a large, successful corporation. In a broad sense, this case points to the value of melding communication and sociological perspectives to analyze the complex features of social movement phenomena. In particular, contemporary research into the communicative avenues of new social movements begins to fill a void in existing campaign and social movement research.

In the end, the Crown Pilot case potentially raises more questions than it answers about social movements, campaigns, and the state of U.S. activism today. For example, here considerable energy was devoted to saving a cracker defined as culturally significant. Movements such as this one call for additional inquiry into the impetus, driving force, and subsistence of citizen action. Why did these citizens unite around Crown Pilot as opposed to any of a multitude of issues potentially of larger social significance (e.g., immunizations for children, national healthcare policy)? Although we can speculate about possible influences, this question needs to be more fully addressed by additional research.

Obviously, there were many factors that contributed to success in the Pilot cracker campaign (e.g., love and passion surrounding a product, a knowledgeable and charismatic spokesperson, technology, timing). Although future grassroots organizers, communication scholars, other social scientists, and even employees in large organizations can gain insights from an analysis of this campaign, clearly this is one case study. As with any real-world situation or problem, many factors are of key import -- and differing ones may play a salient role at different times. Thus, the strategies and events in the Crown Pilot campaign may not repeat themselves or be as useful in analyses of similar situations.

One limitation is that while information technologies appear to have played some important role in this campaign, their application is, to this point, far from universal. The benefits of these technologies, and hence their potential benefits for activist purposes, accrue, at least for now, for individuals with access (Gurak, 1997). Thus, until measures are taken to ensure equal access to technology, both in the U.S. and globally, such tools are not able to foster participation across all citizens.

Along these same lines, we also note that historical precedents surrounding the implementation of past media suggest that political and economic forces will mitigate the true democratic potential of interactive technologies (Drew, 1995). As in past cases, unless definitive steps to ensure open and robust access to both sending and receiving messages via these communication conduits are taken, especially during their continued formative stages, then their potentials for democratic contribution are most likely seriously compromised. Certainly, future work on technology and social movements should address these dimensions. Further, studies of interactive technology need to explore whether new media can materialize their potential to serve as revolutionary means for activism in and of themselves, or whether new media are best implemented as one element among more traditional forms of communication (Gurak, 1997).

Despite these limitations, however, analysis of the communication strategies in the Pilot cracker campaign further informs understanding of new communication media, new social movements, virtual communities, and the possibilities for complex interplay between them. This analysis reinforces the importance of communication in shaping identities and how we see the world. For example, "the lobster was once thought of as 'trash' or 'poverty food' until a New York restaurant promoted its culinary virtues" (Damon, 1996a). In this case, a cracker's symbolism rises far beyond its flour boundaries - it comes to represent an important historical link, one with cultural and regional significance.

Additionally, the actions of Donna Damon and others illustrate what can happen when ordinary citizens organize because they are, in the words of Jimmy Buffet (1994), "mad as hell and ... don't want to take it anymore." Margaret Mead would no doubt take this as additional proof that "a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world" or at least the mind of a corporate giant. As previously noted, the literature over emphasizes large movements and reports too infrequently on movements surrounding changes in everyday life (Gusfield, 1979, 1994). As Farrell (1993) suggests, rhetoric:

works *both* sides of the street. ... Since civic rhetoric is a practice admitting to certain relational goods, its ethical and aesthetic significance should be found not only at the Guggenheim, but among the hoi polloi, dirty fingernails and all (p. 277).

This analysis of the Crown Pilot campaign furthers understanding of one such "everyday life" movement.

The Nabisco representative interviewed said:

I think we learned that there is a business opportunity to keeping an open mind about listening ... I would also say that we learned that customers really, really, really appreciate it when you can demonstrate that their voices are heard. I think a lot of people call these 800 numbers and they think that nothing ever happens.

Here, something did occur. And Gary Varney (1997) may still be singing verse two, "Hardtack is Back," of his "Crooning for Crackers" melody (to the tune of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean") in appreciation:

We thank you, Nabisco, for listening  
We thank you for hearing our pleas  
We'll now enjoy them in our chowder  
Your customers all will be pleased.

Brought back, brought back  
They've brought back the Pilots to me, to me  
Brought back, brought back  
They've brought back Crown Pilots to me.

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