Communicating Global Activism:

Strengths and Vulnerabilities of Networked Politics

W. Lance Bennett, University of Washington, USA

Abstract

Many observers doubt the capacity of digital media to change the political game. The rise of a transnational activism that is aimed beyond states and directly at corporations, trade and development regimes offers a fruitful area for understanding how communication practices can help create a new politics. The Internet is implicated in the new global activism far beyond merely reducing the costs of communication, or transcending the geographical and temporal barriers associated with other communication media. Various uses of the Internet and digital media facilitate the loosely structured networks, the weak identity ties, and the patterns of issue and demonstration organizing that define a new global protest politics. Analysis of various cases shows how digital network configurations can facilitate: permanent campaigns, the growth of broad networks despite relatively weak social identity and ideology ties, transformation of individual member organizations and whole networks, and the capacity to communicate messages from desktops to television screens.   The same qualities that make these communication-based politics durable also make them vulnerable to problems of control, decision-making and collective identity.

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W. Lance Bennett, University of Washington

Networks of activists demanding greater voice in global economic, social, and environmental policies raise interesting questions about organizing political action across geographical, cultural, ideological, and issue boundaries. Protests against world development and trade policies are nothing new. For example, Rucht (1999) has documented such action in Germany dating from the 1980s. However, social justice activism in the recent period seems to me different in its global scale, networked complexity, openness to diverse political identities, and capacity to sacrifice ideological integration for pragmatic political gain (Bennett, 2003a). This vast web of global protest is also impressive in its capacity to continuously refigure itself around shifting issues, protest events, and political adversaries.

The "Battle in Seattle," referring to the demonstrations against the 1999 World Trade Organization ministerial meeting, has become recognized as a punctuating moment in the evolution of global activism (Levi and Olson, 2000). Seattle, like most subsequent demonstrations, primarily attracted local and regional activists. However, there is growing evidence that a movement of global scope is emerging through the proliferation of related protest activities (Lichbach and Almeida, 2001). Observers note, for example,

that activist networks are engaging politically with non-state, transnational targets such as corporations and trade regimes, and that there is growing coordination of communication and action across international activist networks (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Gerlach, 2001; Lichbach & Almeida, 2001; Rheingold, 2002).

It is clear that personal digital media are important to these activists. One indicator is the expansion of a web-based communication infrastructure, marked, for example, by the growth of the Indymedia activist information network (www.indymedia.org) from one outlet to more than 100 in the three years following Seattle. Many activists cite the importance of personal digital media in creating networks and coordinating action across diverse political identities and organizations (see on-line interviews at http://www.wtohistory.org). A key issue is whether these communication practices merely reduce the costs or increase the efficiencies of political action, or whether they change the political game itself. My interest in this article is to explore some of the ways in which digital communication networks may be changing the political game in favor of resource poor players who, in many cases, are experimenting with political strategies outside of conventional national political channels such as elections and interest processes.

Observations reported in this article indicate that digital communication practices appear to have a variety of political effects on the growth and forms of global activism. These effects range from organizational dynamics and patterns of change, to strategic political relations between activists, opponents and spectator publics. In addition, patterns of individual participation appear to be affected by hyperlinked communication networks that enable individuals to find multiple points of entry into varieties of political action.

Moreover, the redundancy of communication channels in many activist networks creates organizational durability as hub organizations come and go, and as the focus of action shifts across different events, campaigns, and targets. Finally, there appears to be a relationship between communication practices and the evolution of democracy itself. One of the important subtexts of this movement is *media democracy*, centered on the conversion of media consumers into producers, with the introduction of open publishing and collective editing software—all channeled through personal digital networks.

While there are many indicators that digital media have become important organizational resources in making this movement, there are also potential problems or vulnerabilities associated with these communication-based networks. For example, the ease of joining and leaving polycentric (multi-hubbed) issue networks means that it becomes difficult to control campaigns or to achieve coherent collective identity frames. In addition, organizations may face challenges to their own internal direction and goals when they employ open, collective communication processes to set agendas and organize action. Some organizations even experience internal transformation when they become important hubs in networks and must accommodate demands by other network members. These vulnerabilities are, of course, in constant creative tension with the strengths outlined above, making this movement an interesting case of large scale applications of networked communication as foundations for political organization and action. This analysis attempts to examine both strengths and vulnerabilities associated with various communication practices that make transnational activism possible.

Talking about such substantial digital media effects flies in the face of the conventional wisdom that Internet and other digital media typically do little more than

amplify and economize communication in political organizations (Agre, 2001; Davis, 1999). For example, Agre (2001) argues that in most cases the Internet is subordinated to the existing routines and patterns of the institution using it, and that Internet applications merely amplify and economize areas that already define the institution. One observer has even gone so far as to assert that "the Internet is less applicable [to] the creation of new forms of democratic public spheres than [to] the support of already existing ones" (Buchstein, 1997:260; discussed by Agre, 2002). The problem with these and dozens of other "minimal effects" accounts of the Internet and politics is that they generally look at how established political institutions and organizations adapt the Internet to existing routines.

It is easy to see how conceptual confusion surrounds the political impact of the Internet and other digital media. When political networks are viewed at the level of constituent organizations, the implications of Internet communications can vary widely. Political organizations that are older, larger, resource-rich, and strategically linked to party and government politics may rely on Internet-based communications mostly to amplify and reduce the costs of pre-existing communication routines. On the other hand, newer, resource-poor organizations that tend to reject conventional politics may be defined in important ways by their Internet presence (Graber, Bimber, Bennett, Davis & Norris, forthcoming). In this analysis, I contend that the importance of the Internet in networks of global protest includes --but also goes well beyond – gains that can be documented for particular resource-poor organizations. For example, effects at the network level include the formation of large and flexible coalitions exhibiting the "strength of thin ties" that make those networks more adaptive and resistant to attack than

coalitions forged through leader-based partnerships among bureaucratic organizations (Gerlach, 2001).

The implication here is not that the distributed (multi-hub, or polycentric) structure of the Internet somehow causes contemporary activists to organize in remarkably non-hierarchical, broadly distributed, and flexible networks. Digital media applications can take on a variety of forms, from closed and hierarchical, to open and broadly distributed. Preferences for the latter pattern reflect the social, personal, and political contexts in which many global activists define their mutual relationships.

The Social Contexts of Internet Activism

One idea upon which most observers agree is that applications of the Internet, like the uses of most communication media, depend heavily on social context. As Castells (2001, p. 50) put it: "The Internet is a particularly malleable technology, susceptible to being deeply modified by its social practice, and leading to a whole range of potential social outcomes." Polycentric (socially distributed) networks that display the flat, non-hierarchical, flexible, and resilient characteristics of much global activism are well supported by various digital technologies (Gerlach, 2001), but the inclination to construct such networks in the first place reflects at least two defining qualities of their makers: the identity processes and the new politics that define many younger generation activists.

Identity in Distributed Social Networks

Various theorists have discussed the transformation of social structures and identity processes associated with economic globalization in the so-called post industrial

or late modern societies (Giddens, 1991; Bennett, 1998; Beck, 2000). In these visions of "late" and "post" modern society, identity becomes a personally reflective (and reflexive) project that is organized and expressed through often elaborately managed lifestyles. Through this process, personal identity narratives replace collective social scripts as the bases for social order. These narratives become interpersonal linkages as network organization begins to displace hierarchical institutions as primary membership and social recognition systems for individuals.

A defining quality of the *network society* is that individuals are likely to form political ties through affinity networks based on repertoires of these narratives. This quality of networks contrasts sharply to the "modernist" tendency to forge social and political order through mutual identifications with leaders, ideologies and memberships in conventional social and political groups. Castells (1997) has documented how these highly individualized identity processes find creative forms of empowerment through diverse organizational capacities of the Internet. In many ways, the organizational, personal, and cultural diversity of global activism reflect what Wellman calls "networked individualism:" the ease of establishing personal links that enable people to join more diverse and more numerous political communities than they would ordinarily join in the material world (Wellman, 2000, paragraph 1.6). I explore these social and identity processes in greater detail elsewhere (Bennett, 2003b). The present analysis is focused on the ways in which identity-driven communication practices characterize and organize the politics of these activists.

One might argue that various longstanding social movements -- feminism and environmentalism come to mind --have displayed similar horizontal and segmented

patterns of network organization. Indeed, one of the classic accounts of such movement

network organization is the SPIN model developed by Gerlach and Hine (1970). SPIN

stands for Segmented, Polycephalous, Integrated, Networks. However, when Gerlach

(2001) applied the SPIN model to contemporary global protest networks, he made two

interesting conceptual adjustments which he passed over without the fanfare that I believe

they deserve. First, he replaced the idea of *polycephalous* organization with *polycentric*

order, indicating that, like earlier SPIN movements, global activist networks have many

centers or hubs, but *unlike* their predecessors, those hubs are less likely to be defined

around prominent leaders. In addition, he noted that the primary basis of movement

integration and growth has shifted from ideology to more personal and fluid forms of

association. In my view, these changes in the SPIN model reflect the identity processes of

fragmented social systems that make electronically managed affinity networks such

essential forms of political organization.

A New Politics Suited to Distributed Communication Networks

Beyond identity processes, a second impetus for creating such broadly distributed

communication networks is that the targets of global activism are both numerous, and

they are slipping off the grid of conventional national politics. Many activists believe that

labor, environment, rights and other policies of their governments have been weakened

by pressures from global corporations and transnational economic regimes such as the

World Trade Organization. The neo-liberal drift and re-branding of labor parties in

Europe and the Democratic Party in the United States provide some evidence for these

concerns. The resulting capacity of corporations to escape regulation and win concessions

from governments has created a political sphere beyond normal legislative, electoral, and regulatory processes – a sphere that Beck (2000) calls sub-politics. The sub-politics of corporations and transnational economic regimes have been countered by activist sub-politics that include global demonstrations, campaigns against companies and economic development regimes, and the creation of epistemic networks to gather and publicize information on global issues (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

The place of government in the activists' political calculus clearly varies from nation to nation and from organization to organization. However, newly emerging forms of political action are being aimed beyond government nearly everywhere in the post - industrial North. These politics include creative experiments with publicly monitored labor, environmental, food, and trade standards regimes designed to hold transnational targets directly accountable to activist networks and their publics (see examples at www.globalcitizenproject.org, under labor standards, fair trade, and corporate social responsibility). These nimble campaigns aimed at corporations and transnational trade and development targets lend themselves to the repertoires of digital communication: lists and action alerts, swarming responses (e.g., denial of service attacks on corporate websites), and the continuous refiguring of web networks as campaigns shift focus and change players.

Tarrow touches on these *subpolitics* and their organizational effects in describing global activism "….as unlikely to sustain high levels of confidence in government and may trigger less trusting attitudes in the public by demonstrating the inadequacy of governmental performance; but on the other hand, neither do they create enduring negative subcultures. Their variform and shifting organizations, their tendency to produce

rapid and rapidly-liquidated coalitions, their focus on short- and medium-term issues rather than fully fledged ideologies do not produce standing activist commitments or deeply held loyalties…" (Tarrow, 1999: 30).

The emergence of a politics that is shifting away from organizational conventions such as leadership, ideology, and government processes invites a fresh theoretical perspective. The goal of this analysis is to begin explaining how webs of contentious transnational politics operate on such a large scale, particularly among groups and individuals joined by little binding leadership or ideology, and whose protests cover such diverse political issues.

Rethinking the Organization of Protest Networks

The features of global activism outlined above raise interesting challenges for thinking about movements and protest politics. One of the best known models of contentious politics refers to the diffusion of protest networks and the accompanying transformation of collective identities as "scale shift" (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 2002a). According to this view, scale shift depends on the existence of several mechanisms of human agency: *brokerage* (creating social links among disconnected sites of protest), *diffusion* (transfer of information across those links), and *attribution of similarity* (mutual identification) (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001, pp. 331-339). As I understand it, this process generally involves face-to-face agency (brokerage) in the recruitment of protesters and in the negotiation of new identity frames to accommodate the expanding coalitions of groups. A now classic formulation of the identity framing process at the core of this theory of scale shift is Snow and Bensford's (1992) account of

the continuous redefining of "interpretive schemata" to provide common meaning as movement coalitions grow.

Most of the cases that illustrate this process are instances of national and cultural mobilization. In order for scale shift to occur trans-nationally and cross-culturally with the magnitude and diversity of contemporary global activism, the process seems to require mediation by digital communication networks. More importantly, the ease of linking to these digital networks (aided by activist preferences for an inclusive politics) also eases the demand to continually renegotiate collective identity frames as movements shift in scale. The idea here is not that communication networks replace social transactions or dispell the identity issues of collective action. Rather, *the nature of social transactions, themselves, are changing* due to the capacity of distributed communication networks to ease personal engagement with others. In thinking about "computer networks as social networks," Wellman and his colleagues describe a variety of ways in which digital communication can initiate, enhance, and in some cases, even replace direct social relationships (Wellman, et. al., 1996). In addition, Castells (1996, 1997) argues that we must grasp the transformations of space, society, and identity that are associated with digital communication networks. Thus, an inseparable mix of virtual and face-to-face communication defines many activist networks, and contacts in these networks may range far from activists' immediate social circles if they can be sustained in terms of the cost and scale offered by digital communication applications.

All of these features of scale shift in the absence of ideological integration, clear collective identity framing, and strong organizational leadership reflect important degrees of organization via communication systems -- as opposed to communication

merely reflecting or amplifying political organization. The following analyses suggest

how the same communication practices that serve strategic political purposes can also

operate as social organizational resources.

Communication as Political Strategy and Organizational Resource

This analysis is based on observations of various protest activities aimed at trade

and development organizations and corporations. Materials developed by the research

teams in these projects can be found at the Global Citizen Project

(www.globalcitizenproject.org), and in the *civic engagement*, *issue campaigns, culture*

jamming, and *digital media* sections of the Center for Communication and Civic

Engagement, http://www.engagedcitizen.org). These studies support a number of

generalizations about the Internet and activist politics, four of which are reported here.

The intriguing feature of each generalization is that communication practices are hard to

separate from organizational and political capabilities, suggesting personal digital

communication is a foundation of this identity- driven subpolitics. The patterns of

communication that both reflect and reproduce global activism are briefly summarized

here and elaborated in the remainder of the article.

- *Permanent campaigns*. Global activism is characterized by long- running
  communication campaigns to organize protests and publicize issues.
  Campaigns in activist politics are not new, but the campaigns of the
  current generation are more protracted. They are less likely to be run by
  central command and coordinating organizations such as unions or

environmental NGOs, making them less centrally controlled, and more difficult to turn on and off. The networking and mobilizing capacities of these ongoing campaigns makes campaigns, themselves, political organizations that sustain activist networks in the absence of leadership by central organizations.

- *Communication in diverse networks is ideologically thin, but rich in terms of individual identity and lifestyle narratives*. In recent years, songbirds have been linked to the fair trade coffee campaign in North America, and clothing brand logos have been attached to sweatshop labor campaigns in Europe and North America. Such communication formulas travel well across broad electronic networks and often reach spectator publics, but they do little to advance common movement ideology or identity framing.

- *Internet use patterns affect both the organizational qualities of networks, and they can affect the internal development of member organizations*. Networks can be reconfigured rapidly as organizations come and go. In addition, hub organizations that become resources for others can be changed by their place in the flow of communication.

- *New media can alter information flows through the mass media*. The creation of a public sphere based in *micro media* (e-mail, lists) and *middle media* Internet channels (blogs, organization sites, e-zines) offers activists an important degree of information and communication independence from the mass media. At the same time "culture jams" and logo campaigns initiated in *micro media* and *middle media* have attracted

surprisingly positive coverage of activist messages in the mass media

(Klein, 1999; Lasn, 1999; Bennett, 2003c).

Permanent Campaigns and Political Organization

It is often said that we have entered the age of permanent political campaigns, whether waged by elected leaders in order to govern after they win office, or by interest groups to mobilize publics and promote their policy agendas. Campaigns increasingly do more than just communicate political messages aimed at achieving political goals. They also become long term bases of political organization in fragmenting late modern (globalizing) societies that lack the institutional coherence (e.g., strong parties, grass roots or bottom-up interest organization) to forge stable political identifications.

In the American case, the model for activist issue campaigns can be traced to "corporate" campaigns pioneered by labor unions in the early 1980s (Manheim 2001). These corporate campaigns have now spread throughout activist and advocacy circles, being adopted by environmental, health, human rights, as well as by anti-globalization and sustainable development groups and coalitions. For example, a small global network of NGOs stopped Monsanto's plans to develop genetically engineered seed with a successful media campaign labeling the sterile seed strain "The Terminator." And the small human rights organization Global Witness successfully targeted the diamond giant De Beers, which ultimately agreed to limit the market for the bloody "conflict" diamonds that motivated mercenary armies to establish regimes of terror in crumbling African states (Cowell 2001).

Some of these campaigns resemble traditional boycotts in the sense that they are run by relatively centralized organizations or coalitions, and they can be turned off when specified goals are accomplished. However, an increasingly common pattern is for whole activist networks to latch onto particularly ripe targets such as Nike or Microsoft because their heavily advertised and ubiquitous logos stick easily to lifestyle meaning systems among consumer publics. This stickiness of logos helps activists get political messages into the mass media, reaching audiences whose attention is often limited in matters of politics. Thus, unlike boycotts, many contemporary issue campaigns do not require consumer action at all; instead, the goal is to hold a corporate logo hostage in the media until shareholders or corporate managers regard the bad publicity as an independent threat to a carefully cultivated brand image.

Success in publicizing hard-to-communicate political messages may bring new players into campaigns even as others leave a network having declared their goals met. The influx of large and unwieldy networks of activists running through political territories once occupied in more orderly fashion by a small number of rights, environmental, consumer protection, labor and development NGOs presents an interesting strategic dilemma for movement organizing. One attraction of centrally run campaigns is the ability to stop them, which reinforces the credibility of activist organizations by rewarding the compliance of campaign targets. The attraction of decentralized campaigns is the ease of joining them and adding new charges against targets.

The vulnerabilities of these networked campaigns are often inseparable from their strengths. Thus, the decentralized webs of thin ties that make for unstable coalitions,

communication noise, lack of clarity about goals, and weak idea-framing, also enable

networks to refigure themselves after losses and disruptions. For example, the San

Francisco based social justice organization Global Exchange (www.globalexchange.org)

left the long-running campaign against Nike after generating enough negative publicity

(see below) to induce company president Phil Knight to promise to take greater

responsibility for poor labor conditions in its contract factories. However, other players

(e.g., United Students Against Sweatshops, and Press for Change, Jeff Ballinger's

founding campaign organization) contended that a key unresolved issue was creating an

effective labor standards monitoring system in the absence of reliable government

regulation (see Bullert, 2000; and Bennett, 2003c). As a result, the network reconfigured

after the loss of the Global Exchange hub, and student activist organizations became the

central hubs. The campaign focus shifted to verifying Nike's claims of greater corporate

responsibility.

Observations of long-running campaigns suggest several hypotheses. *Campaigns*

are likely to continue over time, and change in terms of networks and goals to the extent

that: a) the target is widely recognized and newsworthy; b) the target can be connected

to various lifestyle concerns (consumer protection, endangered species, environmental

quality, human suffering, political corruption); c) weblogs, lists, and networked

campaign sites create an epistemic community that makes the campaign a source of

knowledge about credible problems, while making the target an exemplar of both

problems and solutions.

Beyond their many applications in issue activism, continuous campaign networks

also organize the steady stream of public demonstrations against transnational targets. For

example, Lichbach and Almeida (2001) note that on the dates of the Battle in Seattle,

simultaneous protests were held in at least 82 other cities around the world, including 27

locations in the United States, 40 in other "northern" locations including Seoul, London,

Paris, Prague, Brisbane, and Tel Aviv, and 15 in "southern" locations such as New Delhi,

Manila, and Mexico City. Not only were these other protests not organized centrally by

the Seattle campaign coalition, but information about timing and tactics was transmitted

almost entirely through activist networks on the Internet. In addition to extending the

global reach of single protest events, Internet campaigns also enable activists to create

and update rich calendars of planned demonstrations. Lichbach and Almeida (2001)

discovered wide Internet postings and network sites for no fewer than 39 scheduled

protests between 1994 and 2001. This suggests that Seattle was just one of many events

in a permanent protest campaign organized by different organizations in the global

activist network.

The point here is that sustained issue and protest campaigns on a global scale

cannot be explained by leadership commitments from centralized organizations with

large resource bases or memberships. Coordination through polycentric (distributed)

communication networks marks a second distinctive feature of global activism. In

keeping with our "strengths and vulnerabilities" analysis, the next section suggests that,

while networked communication may help sustain the campaigns that organize global

activism, these leaderless networks may undermine the thematic coherence of the ideas

that are communicated through them.

Communication in Diverse Networks is Ideologically Thin

Both the strengths and weaknesses of loosely linked, ideologically thin networks are illustrated in the permanent campaign against Microsoft. This campaign began with labor activism in the early 1990s, and has since expanded to include trade, consumer protection, product innovation and many other issues, with campaign fronts in North America, Japan, and the European Union. During the years of the most rapid growth in the network (1997-2001), an important hub was Netaction (www.netaction.org), an organization created explicitly as an Internet campaign hub to archive information and mobilize activists (Manheim, 2001; Bennett, 2003c). The richness of Netaction reports and papers reflects the rise of epistemic communities promoting diverse causes of consumer protection, product innovation, electronic privacy, business ethics and practices, and open source software and Internet architecture, among others. Netaction later evolved to occupy similar hub positions in other digital democracy campaigns, and it has reappeared as a hub in the Microsoft network as the campaign entered different phases.

Such networks that do not produce common ideological or issue frames allow different political perspectives to co-exist without the conflicts that such differences might create in more centralized coalitions. On most days, conservative United States Senator Orrin Hatch and consumer activist Ralph Nader would not find themselves in the same political universe. Yet they have comfortably occupied network space for years in the anti-Microsoft network. The network of opposition to Microsoft includes businesses (Sun, Oracle, Netscape and others), consumer protection organizations, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, the Government Accountability Project, labor organizers, and thousands of direct "hactivists" (Manheim, 2001; Bennett, 2003c). These

diverse campaign members can coordinate attacks or wait until the company becomes

vulerable from one attack and open a new front, as happened when labor began a union

organizing effort aimed at Microsoft's many temporary workers in the midst of the

company's antitrust trial with the U. S. government.

Ideologically weak networks can reduce the conflicts often associated with

diverse players entering campaigns, they also may harbor intellectual contradictions.

Thus, when the moment arrived to adopt solutions for the Microsoft "problem," there was

considerable disagreement among key players about what a proper settlement of the

antitrust charges might look like. And when the legal ordeal began to take a toll on

Miscosoft stock value (which fell in the wake of an initial judicial ruling calling for

extreme penalties), the union campaign on labor issues was undermined by company

cutbacks.

Rather than trying to find an issue, identity, or ideology that joined so many

different players in enduring battles on so many fronts against Microsoft, it makes more

sense to think that the openness of the network itself is the defining quality--inviting

diverse activists to use the visibility of the target company and its aggressive culture to

raise the visibility of their many diverse causes. Such networks can give voice to member

organizations without necessarily producing collective action frames of the sort that we

generally associate with the growth of movements. Another example of this is the North

American fair trade coffee campaign in which Global Exchange (former hub in the Nike

sweatshop campaign) became an important hub in a diverse network of birdwatchers,

anti-bioengineering groups, and sustainable development organizations. In this network

each member could maintain its own identity, while adding value to the causes of others.

For example, the Audubon Society provided a credible source for claiming that the failure of coffee companies like Starbucks to pay a fair price for their beans resulted in the disappearance of the small shaded coffee farms which provided habitat for the migrating songbirds that enlivened Northern back yards each summer. The songbird represented a more effective lifestyle symbol for communicating the fair trade message than trying to communicate more ideological discourses about world coffee markets and the plight of peasant farmers (Iozzi, 2002; Bennett, 2003a).

Ideological and identity thinning may also operate in single organizations that adopt open network designs to promote member equality or minimize bureaucracy. Le Grignou and Patou (forthcoming) note this potential for open networks to diminish organizational identity in their analysis of the French organization ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens). ATTAC (www.attac.org) is an interesting case because it began with a very specific organizational goal of creating a tax on global financial transactions and using the funds for sustainable development. ATTAC even formed a Scientific Council to guide the production of high quality information. However, the organization also promoted the autonomy of local chapters through an open communication network that resulted in the posting of diverse concerns from the ATTAC activist membership. Le Grignou and Patou conclude that the easy communication of local interests quickly diversified the organizational agenda to include Commander Marcos, "Mad Cow disease", human rights in Tunisia, and the labor struggles of Danone employees. Le Grignou and Patou explain that the "click here" logic of the open network at once makes connections between such disparate ideas possible, and at the same time creates an intellectual dilemma for the

organization. As one ATTAC officer they interviewed put it, "the main problem for ATTAC today concerns the unification of the movement and the way to give it a more unified content."

Several related hypothesis emerge from this analysis. In particular, the degrees of ideological discourse and identity framing in a network are inversely related to: the number and diversity of groups in the network; the churn, or turnover of links; the equality of communication access established by hub sites in the network; and the degree to which network traffic involves campaigns. This analysis suggests that it is not so much the Internet, but the network structures established through it, that shape the coherence of communication content. This leads to our third generalization: uses of the Internet may have important effects on organizational structures, both inside member organizations, and in terms of overall network stability and capacity.

Internet Applications as Organizational Process

The uses of the Internet may be largely subordinated to existing organizational routines and structures when dedicated to the goals and practices of hierarchical organizations such as parties, interest associations, or election campaigns. However, as noted earlier, the fluid networks of global issue activism enable the Internet to become an organizational force shaping both the relations among organizations and in some cases, the organizations themselves. Some organizations are even transformed by Inter-networks as they take on new functions and partnerships. At least four distinct organizational dynamics have been identified in our case studies of organizational interaction with communication networks: 1) organizational transformation due to

demands of network partners; 2) organizations that "move on" to other networks to avoid

transformation and to maintain their capacity as activist hubs in other campaigns; 3)

network organizations created to perform specific tasks that produce successor networks;

and 4) organizations that adopt open communication networks and then become

transformed by the information exchanges among their members.

Organizational transformation through network demands

Because easy Internet linkages can open organizations to unpredictable traffic

patterns, obscure nodes can become more central hubs in networks. As discussed above,

the Netaction organization in the Microsoft campaign became such a rich archive of

reports and research information about the corporation and the campaign that it became a

central hub in the campaign network (as measured, among other things by overlapping

board of director members). The early mission and identity of the organization were

synonymous with Microsoft, even though the mission statement promised engagement

with a wide range of electronic policy issues. As noted in the next section, Netaction

reclaimed its broader policy agenda only by breaking with the Microsoft campaign and

"moving on" to hub positions in other campaign networks.

Another interesting case is the vast network of *Jubilee* debt relief campaigns. If

one follows the origins of these organizations back into the 1990s, they began largely as

religious networks proclaiming debt relief a moral and religious issue. For example, one

of the largest contingents at the Seattle WTO protests were churches operating under the

Jubilee banner. This coalition led the first large march on the evening of November 29,

1999, drawing 10,000 - 15,000 activists, and setting the stage for the even larger labor-led

actions the next day. Although Jubilee chapters with religious agendas continued to

appear in demonstration organizing networks after Seattle, the organization has evolved

into a confusing array of different organizations in different national contexts. To some

extent, the entry of diverse players into the debt relief game (from rock stars such as

Bono of U2, to nations themselves) put pressures on weak church networks to open their

political and religious frames to larger networks of activists. One result is considerable

instability in the Jubilee organizational system, with various name changes, new

coalitions in different nations, and most recently, very different political frames in North

America and Europe. For example, the United States coalition (www.jubileeusa.org)

retains more of its original religious grass roots identity and network structure, while the

United Kingdom hub (www.jubilee2000uk.org) has moved so far from its religious

origins that they are barely evident in its far flung international think tank and policy

NGO network. Even the name of the latest incarnation of the UK organization has

changed to Jubilee Research, although the URL remains the same as in the last

incarnation.

Moving on to other networks as a protective strategy

Because of the potential to become redefined by location in a communication

network, many organizations that provide coordinating or information functions in

campaign networks adopt a strategy of periodically "moving on" to new networks. As

noted above, Netaction (www.netaction.org) maintained its identity as a multi-issue

organization in the digital communication policy arena by moving on to other campaigns

in areas of digital communication regulation and consumer protection. A recent

inspection of the web site revealed activities in the areas of broadband regulation, electronic privacy, the future of an open Internet, and others.

As indicated in earlier in references to the Nike and fair trade coffee campaigns, Global Exchange is another organization that has been careful to leave campaigns before becoming defined by them. During its time as the main hub in the Nike sweatshop campaign (1995-1998), Global Exchange used creative communication strategies that produced a deluge of negative press for Nike based largely on a worker's own account of conditions in Indonesian factories (Bullert 2000; Bennett, 2003c). Global Exchange left the campaign when Nike CEO Phil Knight admitted that Nike had a labor problem and would do something about it.

Just as the "move on" organization protects itself from transformation by network dynamics, they also tend to make few identity demands on other network organizations. Since Global Exchange, Netaction, and other "move on" organizations know they will leave networks, they are unlikely to broker collective identity frames or induce other organizations to transformation in ways typically associated with movements when they are viewed from more conventional organization-centered perspectives.

Specific task organizations that produce successor networks

Internet umbrella organizations created to organize issue campaigns and demonstrations often take distinctive network forms based on how they allow users to access and communicate through the site. Many of these organizing networks have survived beyond the action that drew them together because they generally offer networking services and calendars that became useful for future communication and planning. In some cases, these secondary planning features of Internet-only mobilizing

networks helped to create successor organizations to mobilize future events. For

example, the A16-2000 umbrella organization that coordinated the demonstrations at the

Washington, D. C. International Monetary Fund meeting in April of 2000 opened its web

site to announce a constantly changing roster of participants. The site enabled newcomers

to post their own rallying messages at the top of the site (A16-2000Network\A16The

Network List.htm). The user interface emphasized the political diversity of participating

groups, along with an amazing number of different political reasons for opposing the

IMF. The list of endorsing and participating groups (692 and still growing at the time I

captured the site) was indexed by geographical location so that organizations in different

locales could be viewed on the same page. Another page of the site revealed an equally

diverse core group of demonstration sponsors: 50 Years is Enough, Alliance for Global

Justice, Campaign for Labor Rights, Global Exchange, Mexico Solidarity Network,

National Lawyers Guild, Nicaragua Network , and Witness for Peace, among others.

    In contrast to the diversity of the A16 organization, the organizing site for the

demonstration against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) meeting in Montreal

in April of 2001 had a much more focused agenda aimed at mobilizing people in

localities and training them in direct action and street theater tactics before they arrived in

Montreal (NAFTANet - International Day of Action - Stop the FTAA.htm). The site

listed a different and much smaller set of lead organizations that those involved in the

IMF protests above. The Ruckus Society featured prominently in the training and local

mobilizing, and the Montreal Anti-Capitalist Convergence was identified as the lead

organization at the protest site. A tighter focus on specific protest themes, training, and

coordinated action was maintained through much more restricted user features and cross communication opportunities than offered by the A16 site.

Despite these differences in the communication interfaces created to organize the two demonstrations, both web sites offered user features that kept them alive and networked with broader communities of activists beyond those attending the specific demonstrations. For example, the FTAA protest site referred to the A16 site (which was still running), and contained its own extensive calendar of past and future demonstrations. In addition, the Montreal organization prominently featured links on its front page to several current issue campaigns against corporations (e.g., Nike and Monsanto) that needed support. Also posted were news reports from activists who had attended the recently concluded first World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil. These user interfaces extend particular protest events forward in time, and give them broad connection to diverse protest communities in cyberspace. Embedding otherwise dated organization sites in these broader structures of time and space helps their successor organizations form with new networking patterns of their own.

Organizations transformed by their internal communication networks

Applications of the Internet and other digital media may also affect the internal development of organizations themselves. As noted in the last section, Le Grignou and Pattou's study of ATTAC in France (forthcoming) found that communication practices affected the political identity of the organization. They also find that the structure of the organization is affected by those communication practices:

Till January 2001, no one represented local groups at the administrative

council… The structure of the association gives them a total autonomy,

which sometimes verges on isolation. Local leaders happen to be in touch

with National Attac only through the Internet, while others hardly ever

receive news from Paris. The electronic offer is sometimes the only link

between local groups and other branches of the association, be it through

discussion lists (*Attac talk*), work lists (*Attac local*), mailing lists (*Grain

de Sable* or *Lignes d'Attac*), or electronic secretaries (site on the WTO or

current campaigns).....Internet is so seminal to the association life that

Local Electronic Correspondants (CEL) have been created, as connected

members would "chaperon" non-connected members.

Thinking about how digital networks can transform the political capacities of both

nodes and collectivities raises some interesting questions about measurement. Some

combination of ethnographic observation, member narratives of organizational roles, and

network link mapping seems appropriate. It is clear, for example, that link maps alone

are often difficult to interpret. A study of Web sites linked to by other organization sites

at the time of the Seattle protests showed the official WTO site was the link leader (2129

links), followed by several protest hubs with impressive links: One World (348); Institute

for Global Communications (111), Seattlewto.org, the sponsored site of the NGO

coalition (92); and Corporate Watch (74), among others (Smith & Smyth, 2000). Various

accounts of the Seattle protests (www.wtohistory.org; Levi & Olson, 2000) suggest that

one could not easily derive the key mobilizing coalition players from these link patterns.

A promising approach is Van Aelst and Walgrave's (forthcoming) analysis of organizations that received news coverage surrounding the 2001 protests against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Montreal. They found that the top 17 organizations mentioned in the news also maintained substantial cross communication channels on the Internet, and that most of them maintained on-line calendars for the FTAA and other protest activities. By these measures, there was a mutually engaged political action network that operated with a high degree of coordination through digital channels. What is interesting is that the underlying coherence in the digital channels linking these organizations was also reflected in mass media attention to the individual members of the networks. This suggests that digital networks have found paths to jump their communication from relatively personalized digital channels to the mass media. It is important to begin understanding these crossover communication effects of digital networks as well.

New Media Can Alter Information Flows through Mass Media

The public spheres created by the Internet and the Web are more than just parallel information universes that exist independently of the traditional mass media. A growing conventional wisdom among communication scholars is that the Internet is changing the way in which news is made. New media provide alternative communication spaces in which information can develop and circulate widely with fewer conventions or editorial filters than in the mainstream media. The gate-keeping capacity of the traditional press is weakened when information appears on the Internet, presenting new material that may prove irresistible to competitors in the world of 24/7 cable news channels that now

occupy important niches in the press food chain. Moreover, journalists may actively seek story ideas and information from Web sources, thus creating many pathways for information to flow from micro to mass media.

An interesting example of micro-to-mass media crossover in global activism began with an e-mail exchange between a culture jammer named Jonah Peretti and Nike (Peretti, 2003). Peretti visited a Nike website that promised greater consumer freedom by inviting customers to order shoes with a name or slogan of their choice on them. He submitted an order to inscribe the term "sweatshop" on his custom Nikes. Several rounds of amusing exchanges ensued in which Peretti chided the company for breaking its promise of consumer freedom. Successive rounds ended with Nike's awkward and less automated refusals to put any of Peretti's requests for political labels on its shoes. Peretti sent the exchange to a dozen friends, who forwarded it to their friends, and, so, the *Nike-Sweatshop* story spread in viral fashion, reaching an audience estimated from several hundred thousand to several million (Peretti, 2003).

Based on the flood of responses he received, Peretti tracked the message as it first circulated through the culture jamming community, then the labor activist community, and then, "…something interesting happened. The micromedia message worked its way into the mass media…" (Peretti, 2003). First it reached middle media sites such as weblogs (*slashdot*, *plastic* and others) where is began to resemble news. From there, it was picked up by more conventional middle media sites such as *Salon,* which are read by journalists. At that point, it was a short journalistic step to *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, NBC's *Today Show*, and dozens of prominent North American and European

news outlets. Whenever Peretti was interviewed about his media adventure, the

connection between Nike and sweatshop was communicated again.

Another flow from micro to mass media has occurred in the vast global network

of anti-Microsoft protest (Bennett, 2003c; Manheim, 2001). Numerous derogatory

images have traveled through Internet chats, networked campaign sites, and webzines,

and surfaced in mainstream news accounts indicating that the company was trying to

"crush competition," that it was known by opponents as "the Seattle Slasher," or that Bill

Gates was the latter day incarnation of Robber Baron icon, John D. Rockefeller. The

difficulty of anticipating the rise of such images -- much less, using standard public

relations techniques to combat them -- has given activists new levers of media power in

global subpolitics. This media activism has forced many companies to weigh the

advantages of highly profitable business models against the damage inflicted upon

precious brand images. Canadian media consultant Doug Miller was quoted in *The

Financial Times* as saying "I visit 75 boardrooms a year and I can tell you the members

of the boards are living in fear of getting their corporate reputations blown away in two

months on the Internet." (Mackin, 2001)

While many activist issue campaigns have secured remarkably favorable media

coverage, disruptive public demonstrations -- the other major power lever of protest

politics -- have generally received fairly negative coverage. The interesting exception is

the Battle in Seattle, which produced fairly extensive coverage of activist messages about

globalization (Rojecki, 2001). The relatively more favorable coverage of Seattle was due,

in my estimation, to a combination of factors: its size and consequence took journalists

by surprise, President Clinton made a public statement admitting the protesters had some

valid concerns, and there was a strong presence of labor and church organizations which

provided credible media sources. Since Seattle, it seems that a more familiar press pattern

has emerged in both U.S. and European media coverage of demonstrations: protesters

have generally been cast as violent and anarchistic, and even equated with soccer

hooligans in some European accounts. (My preliminary impressions will surely be tested

and refined by the great volume of research in progress by scholars around the world).

Beyond the characterizations of the activists, the predominant news framing of the

overall protest movement is also negative, as in "anti-globalization." This is clearly a

news construction that is at odds with how many of the activists think of their common

cause. If movement media framing could be put to a vote among activists, I suspect that

"democratic globalization" would win over "anti-globalization" by a wide margin. For

example, here is how American labor John Sweeney put it: "It's clear that globalization is

here to stay. We have to accept that and work on having a seat at the table when the rules

are written about how globalization works." (Greenhouse, 2002) In another account,

Susan George (one of the founding members of the French global social justice

organization ATTAC) rejects the "anti-globalization" framing as an insultingly poor

account of global activism. In explaining the inadequacies of the "anti-globalization"

frame, she also reveals why better accounts are unlikely to be written by news

organizations bent on producing simple narratives: "The movement itself is, however,

multi-focus and inclusive. It is concerned with the world: omnipresence of corporate rule,

the rampages of financial markets, ecological destruction, maldistribution of wealth and

power, international institutions constantly overstepping their mandates and lack of

international democracy." (George, 2001).

Mass media framing of movements clearly varies from case to case, depending on how activist communication strategies interact with media gatekeeping (Gamson, 2001). Gitlin (1980) identified the demand of news organizations for movements to produce leaders and simple messages as part of the explanation why the American new left of the 1960s received considerable media attention, and also fragmented into disunity and internal conflict. A global activist movement that is committed to inclusiveness and diversity over central leadership and issue simplicity should have low expectations of news coverage of demonstrations that display the movement's leaderless diversity in chaotic settings.

Why has a movement that has learned to secure good publicity for particular issue campaigns and organizations not developed more effective media communication strategies for mass demonstrations? I think that the answer here returns us to the opening discussion of the social and personal context in which this activism takes place. Not only are many activists in these broadly distributed protest networks opposed to central leadership and simple collective identity frames, but they may accurately perceive that the interdependence of global politics defies the degree of simplification demanded by most mass media discourse. While issue campaign networks tend to focus on dramatic charges against familiar targets, most of the demonstration organizing networks celebrate the diversity of the movement and resist strategic communication based on core issues or identity frames. For example, Van Aelst and Walgrave (forthcoming) found at least 11 political themes that were shared by substantial portions of the network involved in the FTAA demonstrations in 2001. Thus, demonstrations may be staged mainly as reminders of the human scale, seriousness, and disruptive capacity of this movement, while issue

campaigns remain the stealth factor carrying radical messages through the gates of the mass media.

Conclusion

The Internet is implicated in the new global activism far beyond reducing the costs of communication, or transcending the geographical and temporal barriers found in other communication media. Various uses of the Internet and other digital media facilitate the loosely structured networks, the weak identity ties, and the issue and demonstration campaign organizing that define a new global politics. In particular, we have seen how particular configurations of digital networks facilitate: permanent campaigns, the growth of broad networks despite (or because of) relatively weak social identity and ideology ties, the transformation of both individual member organizations and the growth patterns of whole networks, and the capacity to communicate messages from desktops to television screens.   The same qualities that make these communication-based politics durable also make them vulnerable to problems of control, decision-making and collective identity.

It is clear that personal relations remain important in the glue of this movement, giving particular meaning to the now trite slogan that the global is local. Interviews with Seattle WTO protesters make clear that personal contacts were essential to organizing such an effective large scale demonstration (see on line interview transcriptions at www.wtohistory.org). At the same time, the creation of digital information and planning networks eased personal frictions and strengthened fragile relations. More generally, the growing technical capacity of activists to report on their own actions has created

unprecedented parallel public records of events, while permitting unusual degrees of

organization within chaotic real time situations (Rheingold, 2002).

What can we conclude from weighing these strengths and vulnerabilities, and

from the balance between the virtual and the material in these networks? Perhaps most

importantly, it seems that the ease of creating vast webs of politics enables global activist

networks to finesse difficult problems of collective identity that often impede the growth

of movements. To a remarkable degree, these networks appear to have undergone scale

shifts while continuing to accommodate considerable diversity in individual level

political identity. Moreover, the success of networked communication strategies in many

issue and demonstration campaigns seems to have produced enough innovation and

learning that keep new organizations emerging despite (and because of) the chaos and

dynamic change in those organizations. In order to grasp these properties of

communication-based politics, it is important to resist the temptation to view this scene

from the perspective of particular organizations or issues. Instead, the dynamic network

becomes the unit of analysis in which all other levels (organizational, individual,

political) can be analyzed most coherently.

The rise of distributed electronic public spheres may ultimately become the model

for public information in many areas of politics, whether establishment or oppositional. It

is clear that conventional news is withering from the erosion of audiences (more in

commercial than in public service systems), and from the fragmentation of remaining

audiences as channels multiply (Bennett 2003b). Perhaps the next step is a thoroughly

personalized information system in which the boundaries of different issues and different

political approaches become more permeable, enabling ordinary citizens to join

campaigns, protests, and virtual communities with few ideological or partisan divisions. In this vision, the current organizational weaknesses of Internet mobilization may become a core resource for the growth of new global publics.

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