New Media Power:

The Internet and Global Activism

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Prospects for contesting media power may appear to be smaller today than ever. Observers note a combination of global media trends that have diminished the quantity, quality, and diversity of political content in the mass media. These trends include: growing media monopolies, government deregulation, the rise of commercialized news and information systems, and corporate norms shunning social responsibility beyond profits for shareholders (Bagdikian, 2000; McChesney, 1999; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). In the United States, the quest to deliver consumers to advertisers with low cost content has dramatically shrunk the space for even mainstream news about politics, government, and policy (Bennett, 2003a; Patterson, 1993, 2000). The political space that remains is increasingly filled by news formulas based on scandal, mayhem, and personality profiles (Bennett, 2003a). These conditions are clearly less severe in systems with dominant public service commitments, but even the venerable British news system has undergone substantial upheaval as commercial pressures have reduced news programming on private channels (Semetko, 2000), and the formidable BBC has entered a period of reinvention.

The unanswered question is: *Have these changes in media systems limited the capacities of groups contesting established power arrangements to communicate both*

among themselves and to larger publics? Since political content space has been sacrificed to more commercially viable programming, it might be easy to conclude that political activists and minorities are even farther removed from the mass media picture. If this is the case, the political viability of new movements might be in doubt. As German political scientist Joachim Raschke starkly described the importance of mass media for movements: "A movement that does not make it into the media is non-existent." (quoted in Rucht, forthcoming). Despite the hyperbole in this claim, there are notable cases in which media logic has undermined the viability and even changed the organizational coherence of movements (Gitlin, 1981).

Rucht (forthcoming) argues that stark generalizations about media and movements are difficult to support, as different protest eras have been characterized by different media patterns. Gamson (2001) observes that media coverage of collective action movements even varies considerably from issue to issue. Finally, media access also varies with the public communication strategies and organization models adopted by cause movements, as indicated in a comparative analysis of abortion discourse in Germany and the United States (Feree, Gamson, Gerhards, and Rucht, 2002).

Adding to the theoretical challenge of generalizing about patterns of media power is the core question of just what we mean by media these days. With the fragmentation of mass media channels and audiences, and the proliferation of new digital communication formats, it is difficult to draw sharp boundaries around discrete media spheres. As various media become interactively connected, information flows more easily across technological, social, and geographical boundaries. Which brings us to the subject of this chapter: the rise of global protest networks aimed at bringing social justice to the neo-

liberal world economic regime. These activist networks have used new digital media to coordinate activities, plan protests, and publicize often high quality information about their causes. Considerable evidence suggests that global activists have not only figured out how to communicate with each other under the mass media radar, but how to get their messages into mass media channels as well (Bennett, forthcoming).

Many activists are sharply critical of mass media coverage, often charging that the press and officials have criminalized their protest behaviours. However, it is also clear that global activists have neither been isolated nor destroyed by mass media filtering. The dense information networks of the Web offer ample evidence of internal communication. Large numbers of mass actions around the world have received extensive, if generally negative, media coverage. At the least, such coverage signals the presence of a movement that is demanding a say in world economic policies and their social and environmental implications. Finally, numerous campaigns against corporate business practices, trade and development policies have received favourable coverage in leading media outlets (Bennett 2003b, forthcoming). There is little evidence that global media have marginalized global protest. George Monbiot proclaimed in the *Guardian* that "The people's movements being deployed against corporate power are perhaps the biggest, most widespread popular risings ever seen" (Redden, 2001, n.p.).

This chapter explores the rise of global activist networks that have challenged mass media power. My analysis does not ignore the fact that many conventional media power relations still apply to the representation of the radicals and their causes. As noted above, news coverage of demonstrations, both in Europe and the United States, is often filled with images of violence and hooliganism. Most of that coverage makes little effort

to describe the diversity of issues and demands in the movement -- opting, instead, to lump them all together under the largely journalistic construction "anti-globalization." Nor have activists networked and communicated so effectively that they have somehow put global capitalism on the run. As Sassen (1998) points out, the preeminent uses of global communications networks remain the efforts of corporations and governments to strengthen the neoliberal economic regime that dominates life on the planet today.

All of this said, impressive numbers of activists have followed the trail of world power into relatively uncharted international arenas and found creative ways to communicate their concerns and to contest the power of corporations and transnational economic arrangements. In the process, many specific messages about corporate abuses, sweatshop labor, genetically modified organisms, rainforest destruction, and the rise of small resistance movements, from East Timor to southern Mexico, have made it into the mass media on their own terms (Bennett, forthcoming). Moreover, in developing direct power relations with global corporations, activists have exploited the vulnerability of carefully developed brand images by tagging them with politically unpleasant associations. The threat of holding brands hostage in the media spotlight has become an important power tactic in the fight for greater corporate responsibility (Bennett, 2003b).

This analysis is concerned with identifying *what conditions enable activists to use so-called new media --mobile phones, the Internet, streaming technologies, wireless networks, and the high quality publishing and information sharing capacities of the World Wide Web – to communicate the messages of their protest networks across both geographical and media boundaries*. The phrasing of this question is important to reiterate. I have talked elsewhere about *how* activists are using new media to promote

their causes (Bennett, 2003b, forthcoming). What is missing from my account thus far, and from many others as well, is an understanding of the social, psychological, political, and media contexts that make new media particularly conducive to enhancing the power of this global activist movement. To put the issue starkly: the Internet is just another communication medium. Admittedly, the Net has a number of distinctive design features and capabilities, but these differences do not inherently or necessarily change who we are or what we do together. However, personal digital media offer capacities for change if people are motivated by various conditions in their environments to exploit those capacities. In short, whether we go shopping or make revolution on the Internet – and how the shopping trip or the revolution compares to its less virtual counterparts – are more the results of the human contexts in which the communication occurs than the result of the communication media themselves (Agre, 2001). The remainder of this chapter addresses the interactions between new media and the social conditions than have enabled their uses for often impressive political ends.

Assessing the Political Significance of the Internet

Much of the attention to the Internet and politics has been directed at the places where the least significant change is likely to occur: in the realm of conventional politics. Established organizations and institutions such as unions, political parties, governments, and election campaigns are likely to adapt new communication technologies to their existing missions and agendas. Thus, it becomes hard to see transformative effects beyond reducing the speed or cost of existing communication routines. However, in areas in which new patterns of human association are emerging in response to new issues --

and new forms of political action are developing as well -- new communication options have the potential to transform both political organization and political power relations. (For a review of different political applications and effects of the Internet, see Graber, Bimber, Bennett, Davis & Norris, forthcoming).

As noted above, the recent period has been marked by impressive levels of global activism, including: mass demonstrations, sustained publicity campaigns against corporations and world development agencies, and the rise of innovative public accountability systems for corporate and governmental conduct. All of these activities seem to be associated in various ways with the Internet. In some cases, the simple exchanges of information involved could also be accomplished by mail, phone, or fax. In these cases, the internet simply enhances the speed and lowers the costs of basic communication – at least for those who have crossed the digital divide. In other cases, however, the Internet and other technologies such as cellular phones and digital video, enable people to organize politics in ways that overcome limits of time, space, identity, and ideology, resulting in the expansion and coordination of activities that would not likely occur by other means. Even for those still on the other side, the digital divide can be crossed in some cases with the assistance of groups dedicated to transferring technology. For example, Greenpeace has made efforts to empower continuing victims of the Bhopal disaster (www.greenpeace.org).

Communication in distributed networks becomes potentially transformative when networks spill outside of the control of established organizations. Networks that are not limited to the agendas of any of their members may, under the right conditions, become sustainable, growing democratic organizations. They may exhibit high volume,

simultaneous, interactive communication, complete with web-based organizing and planning, and hyperlinked public access to large volumes of politically diverse information.

When networks are not decisively controlled by particular organizational centers, they embody the Internet's potential as a relatively open public sphere in which the ideas and plans of protest can be exchanged with relative ease, speed, and global scope –all without having to depend on mass media channels for information or (at least, to some extent) for recognition. Moreover, the coordination of activities over networks with many nodes and numerous connecting points, or hubs, enables network organization to be maintained even if particular nodes and hubs die, change their mission, or move out of the network. Indeed, the potential of networked communication to facilitate leaderless and virtually anonymous social communication makes it challenging to censor or subvert broadly distributed communication even if it is closely monitored. These points are elaborated by Redden:

> The fact that it is a decentralised, distributed network currently makes it hard for any elite to control online activities. It allows fast one-to-one, one-to-many and even many-to-many communication in web and conferencing forums. Together, the technological and economic aspects of the Net allow for cheap self-publication without mediation by corporate publishing....Of course, cheap is a relative term. The Net is cheap, not in absolute terms, but relative to the efficiency of message distribution. It is clearly not a panacea that guarantees freedom of speech for all. But while it is not accessible to everyone who has something to say, it *does*

dramatically increase the numbers of people who can afford the time and

money to distribute information translocally to large numbers of other

people. In short, it allows individuals and community groups to reduce the

influence gap between themselves and wealthier organizations (Redden,

2001, n.p).

The capacity to transform time, space, costs, and the very roles of information

producers and consumers also enables the rapid adaptation and transformation of political

organizations, and the creation of new sorts of power relationships (Bennett,

forthcoming). For example, a short but creative partnership between Adbusters

(www.adbusters.org) and Greenpeace (www.greenpeace.org) created a counter image

campaign for Coca-Cola. One of the *subvertisements* featured Coke's polar bear icons,

mother and cubs, huddled together on a melting arctic ice flow as Coke's fantasy

consumer world suddenly merged with the harsh environmental effects of the gases

(HFCs) Coke employed in its cooling and bottling processes. As part of this power

struggle, a rogue version of the company's actual website was created, and Coke's

carefully crafted consumer icons were replaced with politically disturbing images,

including the cowering bears. The threat of hijacking and subverting the company's

branded environment during its biggest commercial event, the Olympics, led the

company to make a quick business calculation and commit to changing the chemicals

used in its manufacturing process. One can get a sense of the communication politics of

this campaign by visiting the rogue site at http://www.cokespotlight.org. For a look at the

Climate Change bears, click on *action* and then click on *print a poster*.

What Kinds of Organizations Are Global Activist Networks?

The theoretical vocabularies used to describe hierarchical Weberian organizations or brokered political coalitions (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001) captures only part of the shifting social formations of vast, linked networks of individuals and organizations operating loosely but persistently to expand the public accountability of corporations, trade and development regimes, and governments. Yet it is not altogether clear how to characterize these networks. Even network theorists recognize that network structures are as varied as their social memberships and purposes (Wellman, et. al., 1996).

Some observers wax dramatic about the potential of vast Internet movements to organize and react rapidly to threats against human rights or planetary survival anywhere on the globe. For example, Richard Hunter has coined the term "Network army." which he describes as "… a collection of communities and individuals who are united on the basis of ideology, not geography. They are held together by public communications, the Internet being a prime example…. Network armies don't have a formal leadership structure. They have influencers, not bosses who give orders" (Holstein, 2002, n.p.). The military metaphor is also employed by Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) who use the term *netwar* to describe the swarming behaviors of terrorists, criminal networks, and high tech political militants. Another allusion to the distributed organizational impact of networked communication comes from technology popularizer Howard Rheingold, who has coined the term "smart mobs" to refer to people acting in concert on the basis of digital personal communication. He cites diverse examples of smart mob behavior that include: the overthrow of Philippine President Estrada in 2001 with a series of demonstrations coordinated through cell phone messaging, the instant strategy and

publicity by activists at the World trade Organization Demonstrations in Seattle in 1999, and the planning of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington (Rheingold, 2002; Schwartz, 2002).

Terms such as *network armies, netwars,* and *smart mobs* dramatize the transforming potential of new communication technologies, yet they seem inadequate to describe the emergence of loosely organized (segmented and independent, yet connected), geographically dispersed, and locally engaged collections of activists. The mob and army metaphors break down in part because they do not capture the daily activities of activists; at best they (inadequately) refer to episodic collective outbursts. Beyond the occasional mass demonstration, activist networks are more likely to be found working on public information campaigns, negotiating standards agreements with the managers of companies, sharing information with other members of their networks, and finding ways to build local communities around social justice issues both at home and elsewhere.

Moreover, unlike armies, most global activist networks do not display a hierarchical command organization. And unlike mobs, they have considerably more refined communication and deliberative capacities. Perhaps the best account of the type of movement organization that enables vast networks to pursue diverse social justice goals on a global level is the SPIN model proposed by Gerlach and Hines (1968), and updated by Gerlach (2001). SPIN refers to movement organization types that are segmented, polycentric, integrated, networks. *Segmentation* involves the fluid boundaries that distinguish formal organizations, informal groups, and single activists that may join and separate over different actions, yet remain available to future coordination.

Polycentric refers to the presence of multiple hubs or centers of coordination in a network of segmented organizations. In their earlier formulation, Gerlach and Hine (1968) referred more explicitly to leadership, and used the term polycephalous, referring to many heads. In recent years, Gerlach (2001) notes an avoidance of formal leadership, and a preference for personal ties among activists that enable each to speak for the organization, and to hold multiple organizational affiliations – hence, the shift to the term *polycentric*. The *integration* principle has also evolved to reflect the horizontal structure of distributed activism. Ideologies figured more prominently in earlier movement accounts, both in integrating and dividing groups (creating new segments). The requirement for ideological coherence seems far weaker in global activist circles today. The integrative function is provided by personal ties, recognition of common threats, pragmatism about achieving goals, and the ease of finding associations and information through the Internet. Inclusiveness has become a strong meta-ideological theme.

The resulting *networks* characterized by this segmented, polycentric, and integrated organizational form are not centrally or hierarchically limited in their growth, or in their capacities to recombine around different threats or internal disruptions. Since the social network linkages are nonhierarchical, information exchange is relatively open. And the redundancy of links in segmented polycentric networks enables them to continue to function even when important organizations leave or change their roles. This is how Gerlach described the emergence of SPIN organization in global activism:

> Since at least the 1990s, an increasingly broad array of environmental
> rights, social justice, farm, and labor activists, as well as anticapitalist

anarchists, have worked in various ways to define multinational

corporations and international banking, trade, and economic-development

organizations as threats to human welfare and environmental health,

because of their pursuit of global economic integration and growth. These

activists promulgate their ideas about these global threats through personal

contact, print media, and especially, the Internet. Thus informed, the

activists use major worldwide meetings of officials of the international as

forums to gather in protest and publicly communicate the threats they

perceive. Their often militant demonstrations force responses from police

and local governments, which then provide new opposition against which

they can converge. One noted example took place in Seattle, Washington

from late November to early December at a meeting of the World Trade

Organization (Gerlach, 2001, pp. 300-301).

Limits on Definitions of Global Activism as a Movement

In a useful attempt to distinguish global activism from many other types of transnational

political action, Tarrow (2002) offers an inventory of other patterns of activism on the

world scene that are often mistakenly linked to globalization. In the process, he issues a

warning about too-casual uses of globalization as an explanatory factor:

…many forms of transnational activism – such as human rights,

humanitarian aid, and justice against genocide and torturers – have little or

nothing to do with globalization and much more to do with dictatorship,

democracy, and the abridgement of human rights. By placing such

movements under the global umbrella we risk obscuring their distinct

origins and dynamics. I prefer to limit the term "globalization" to major

increases in the interdependence of economic relations – a trend that has

occurred several times in history (Tilly 2002) and is by no means

unilinear. What is perhaps distinct about it in our era is that it is

accompanied by a partially-independent process, the creation of a web of

international institutions and organizations. By reducing the causal chain

of transnational politics to a by-product of globalization, analysts both risk

ignoring a great deal of transnational activism that has nothing to do with

globalization and ignore the significant independent role of both state and

international institutions in bringing people together across national

boundaries (Tarrow, 2002, pp. 16-17).

These points are well taken. However, beyond their confines lies a protest

movement that is uniquely engaged with the "partially independent process" at the root of

national and international power shifts associated with economic globalization. Not only

is this movement engaged with new sites of global economic power, but the activists

associate in ways that reflect new globalization-related aspects of identity and resistance.

Because of these patterns of association (some identified by Gerlach, above), these global

activists have developed models for empowering uses of digital communication media

that have not been employed by many of the groups that Tarrow rightly rules out of the

globalization protest movement. Why some activists are pursuing more empowering

applications of new communication technology, and others are not, involves being rooted

in very different (e.g., globalization vs. state centered) social and political contexts. These contextual factors are developed theoretically in the next section.

Internet Empowerment: Some Theoretical Generalizations

An obvious generalization that networks of diverse groups could not be sustained without the presence of digital communication channels (email, lists, organization and campaign websites, mobile phones) that facilitate information exchange, coordinate action, and establish electronic records of common cause. A related generalization is that the scale of protest on a global level seems impossible without the global communication and coordination capabilities of the Internet. A third generalization building on the first two is that the Internet enables both the diversity and the global scale of protest at greatly reduced costs of brokerage that are ordinarily attributed to the expansion of movement coalitions (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001).

Even more important for explaining the flexibility, diversity, and scale of this activism is the way in which the preferences for leaderless and inclusive networks is suited to the distributed and multidirectional capabilities of Internet communication. Communication within many of the organizations in these networks also reflects a similar decentralized, distributed model. An interesting example is the Indymedia (www.indymedia.org) activist information system analyzed by Downing in this volume. This system has grown from a single collective that produced live information during the "Battle in Seattle" in 1999, to nearly one hundred affiliates around the world. While there is some hierarchical editing and writing of stories, Indymedia is remarkably true to its open publishing commitment that enables virtually anyone to become a reporter. This

commitment to democratize the media is promoted in efforts to create open source, automated systems for posting, archiving, editing, and syndicating networked information.

In another case, the French organization ATTAC (www.attac.org), founded in Paris in 1998, has produced various national counterparts in Sweden, Germany, and elsewhere, yet their agendas and political tactics all seem different. Even ATTAC's network in France has grown in ways that resist direction from central leadership in Paris, while the peripheral committees have elevated a variety their own issues to the common agenda. Although a leadership group in Paris still takes actions in the name of the organization, the agenda of the organization reflects the churn of local initiatives and virtual deliberations. One result is that ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens) has moved away from its initial chartering mission of securing a "Tobin" tax on world financial transactions to be returned to aid impoverished localities (Le Grignou and Patou, forthcoming).

Understanding Global Activism as A Product of Globalization

What the above examples suggest is that the rise of global activism --as reflected primarily in the coordination of issue campaigns and far-flung demonstrations--should not be attributed solely to the reduced communication costs of the Internet. A stronger theoretical proposition involves specifying what the activists bring to their digital interactions. I propose that the underlying social and political dynamics of protest have changed significantly due to the ways in which economic globalization has refigured politics, social institutions, and identity formation within societies. In particular, we

should not take the multi-issue linkages, the choice of transnational targets, the facelessness, the inclusiveness, or the global scale of this activism for granted. These features of the global social justice movement may reflect the underlying social and psychological contexts in which both the activists and their Internet applications are embedded. In other words, digital personal media enable the fine linkages that connect people across time, space and issues, but what opens growing numbers of activists to see so few temporal, spatial, political or issue barriers in the first place? *What features of the contemporary society motivate activists to form networks that are at once fluid, collective and individualistic?*

Showing how domestic restructuring shapes the political outlooks and the communication styles of activists is a key element of our story, but there is more. Global communication infrastructures have also changed in important ways, enabling: 1) the production of high quality content by ordinary people; 2) the creation of large scale interactive networks engaged by that content; 3) the transmission of that content across borders and continents; and 4) the convergence of media systems so that personal (micro media) content has more pathways through which to enter mass media channels. In these ways, the global change movement is empowered by the dual capacity of the Internet for internal and external communication. For example, the Internet attracts growing numbers of ordinary media consumers who may encounter activist information on the Net itself and in the growing interfaces between the Net and the mass media. This audience-building capacity of the Internet seems to differ from earlier activist internal communication (niche newspapers, mimeographed pamphlets, underground radio) by reaching audiences that frequently extend far beyond activist circles. One question that

emerges here is: *What properties of digital media systems enable information to flow through the information layers of the Web until it reaches both consumers and producers of the mass media?*

Based on these considerations, the power of the internet in global protest (and in many other political other settings as well) can be traced to at least three important elements of its human context-- the first two derived from economic effects of globalization, and the third from the globalization of communication infrastructures:

a) the willingness of activists to share, merge, and tolerate diverse political identities;

b) the perception on the part of many activists that vast and complex problems have escaped the regulatory grasp of governments and nations, and that these problems require scaling protest activities across great reaches of time and space; and

c) the growing permeability of all media -- mass and niche, old technology and new-- to cross-cutting communication that enables viral messages to travel the newly configured bounds of cyber-time and space (see b), and to reach large publics with identities that are open to the diverse experiences that global change has visited on many inhabitants of the planet (see a).

What makes these conditions the most important contextual factors shaping the power of personal digital media in global activism? They happen to be, in my view, the

three most important non-economic correlates of globalization itself: the freeing of

identity from the conforming dictates of modern organizations; the refiguring of time,

distance, and place; and the construction of ever more sophisticated and interlinked

communication networks that both drive and harmonize the first two factors. For

development of these ideas, see Giddens (1991), Beck (1999, 2001), and Castells (1996,

1997).

Putting Internet Politics in Context

Thus far, I have contended that the Internet is not inherently transformative of either

human communication or social and political relations. Rather, it is the interaction

between the Internet and its users -- and their interactions, in turn, in material social

contexts -- that constitute the matrix within which we can locate the power of the new

media to create new spaces for discourse and coordinated action. Our exploration of new

media power thus entails a theoretical exploration of the three primary social, spatial, and

communicational contexts in which the Internet is used.

Globalization of Resistance: The Identity Shift

There is a burgeoning literature on how global economic change has affected the basic

institutions of society (family, church, school, job, community) in ways that produce

profound effects on individual identity. Giddens (1991) was among the first to recognize

that these changes were both negative (producing stress, insecurity, complex life

management issues, personal responsibility-taking for structural problems) and positive

(expanding personal freedoms to choose and change identities). What seems most important is that as identity bonds weaken from groups, people have less reason to create and maintain their identities through conventional (partisan, national, and ideological) forms of social conflict and exclusion.

The important (and not to be underestimated) exceptions, of course, are threatened traditional and conservative groups (Christian and Islamic fundamentalists, ethnic nationalists, etc.) in fragmenting modern societies. While reactionary groups struggle to hold the line on change, often by trying to impose threatened moral values on the rest of society, those who are more adaptive to the transformation of society often engage in remarkable explorations of self and identity: forming new types of families, new spiritual movements, exchanging world art and music, exploring new jobs and careers, attributing less importance to nation and government, and forming cosmopolitan ties with others in distant parts of the world.

As Tarrow (2002) notes, cosmopolitanism is not a new phenomenon. The Silk Road and the Hansa League come to mind. However, there does appear to be something of what he and his colleagues term a *scale shift* in recent times, implying both an increase in numbers of those with identifications and activities in transnational localities, and the emergence of a class of ordinary citizens who increasingly see the sites of their political action as ranging from local to global without necessarily passing through national institutions on the way. He distinguishes global social justice activists as constituting a movement in contrast to other cosmopolitans who have long worked in international arenas to deliver disaster relief aid, to assess the conditions of immigrant populations, or to target specific states for human rights abuses: "I will, however, use the term *global*

justice movement to apply to that coalition of environmental, human rights, developmental and protectionist groups and individuals who came together around the turn of the century against the injustices of the international financial system and its leading member, the United States." (Tarrow, 2002, p. 21)

Inglehart (1997) identifies those most likely to shift their identifications and interests away from conventional national politics as younger, more educated generations who have come into adult life during the advanced stages of globalization. I have discussed the ways in which these identity changes have resulted in a shift toward a *lifestyle politics* in which ideology, party loyalties, and elections are replaced with issue networks that offer more personal and often activist solutions for problems (Bennett, 1998). As identities become more fluid, and less rooted in geographical place (e.g., nation) and political time (e.g., the election calendar), individuals are both freer and under greater pressure to invent themselves and their politics.

It is important to recognize the structural roots of these broad identity changes. Beck (2001) makes a distinction between the late-modern condition that he terms *individualization*, and the older ideological concept of *individualism*. Individualization reflects the breakdown of one set of social welfare structures and their replacement by more direct market experiences with work, heath care and other basic social needs. This restructuring of the individual experience at once makes the state less protective or useful, while it frees individuals to explore cosmopolitan, transnational political arrangements that may better address the problems in their current condition (Beck, 2001, p. 9).

Old (modernist) labor and ideological activism continue in the present transitional phase of global change, yet the institutional foundations of such collective consciousness are eroding. This means that the social and identity principles underlying resistance itself need to be refigured as new generations of activists emerge. For example, Gramsci's classic assessment of the social foundations of political identity seem to poorly describe the ranks of the Direct Action Network, The Ruckus Society, Indymedia, and the many neo-anarchists joining protest networks today:

> In acquiring one's conception of the world, one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting. We are all conformists of some conformism or other…The starting point of critical - elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. (Gramsci 1971, 324)

Mittleman (2000) and many others (e..g., Beck, 1999, 2001; Giddens, 1991) argue that globalization has altered this process of group-based identity formation and resistance by altering the conditions of group life not just in the servant states of the global economy but in the dominant post industrial democracies as well. As individuals experience social fragmentation, the ironic result is that the unexamined traces of group memberships become replaced with far more examined identity processes. People are more likely to discover the self as an active project involving reinvention, therapy, self improvement, personal and planetary renewal, and spiritual quests. As collective

identities expressed in ideologies become less useful in mediating and linking movement

networks, individual activists are more able to identify with the experiences of "other"

classes, causes, cultures, and places (Mittleman, 2000, p. 169).

The ease of identifying with distant and diverse partners in problem definition,

solution, and cosmopolitan community is the engine that drives the process of

individualization into new collective forms. The Internet happens to be a medium well

suited for easily linking (and staying connected) to others in search of new collective

actions that do not challenge individual identities. Hence global activist networks often

become collectivities capable of directed action while respecting diverse identities. This

diversity may create various problems for maintaining thematic coherence in networks

(see Bennett, forthcoming) and for the capacity of outsiders –particularly those still

embedded within modernist political contexts --to grasp the core concerns of the activists.

Despite such vulnerabilities of networks, the power of the Internet is thus inextricably

bound to the transformation of identity itself (Castells, 1997). This echoes the earlier

claim that communication technologies cannot be understood without reference to the

identities and the symbolic interfaces of the people using them.

Despite the chaotic potential of SPIN type networks, the diversity permitted by

loosely linked communication nodes makes them both enduring and adaptive. Ideological

motivation may still drive participants in their own spheres of action, but their

coordinated activities need not be based on shared ideological understandings, or even

common goals. Moreover, unlike old-style coalitions of convenience, virtual activists

need not be located in the same place or even threatened by the same root problem. An

interesting example here is the North American Fair Trade coffee network, a broad

collection of activists dedicated to creating a fairly priced market for coffee grown by small producers in various parts of the world. According to the activists, small farmers are rapidly being driven off their farms by price systems that favor large industrial growers who, not incidentally for our story, also tend to replace shaded coffee plantations with larger acreages of cleared land. For agribusiness interests, cutting the shade canopy means growing more robust beans that can be tended with more mechanized farming. For environmentalists and conservationists, this means killing species of songbirds that migrate from southern forests to North America each year.

The North American fair trade coffee network in the recent period is led by a coalition of three organizations that have little in common ideologically. Yet they have developed a campaign to pressure American coffee retailers to subscribe to fair trade business standards and to promote fair trade coffee in their advertising and marketing. The following capsule account of this network follows an analysis by David Iozzi (2002), a student who has studied this network in detail. The three hubs of the coffee network are Global Exchange, a world development and social justice organization based in San Francisco, the Audubon Society, a national bird watchers and conservation organization with a staff person in the Seattle office dedicated to the campaign, and the Organic Consumers Association, an organic and healthy food association based in Minnesota.

Global Exchange has developed a set of business standards suitable for North American coffee companies, and designed a campaign that threatens corporate brand images to secure compliance. This *logo campaign* (Klein, 1999) recognizes that complex political and economic arguments are hard to communicate across the identity boundaries of ordinary people who are most concerned with the quality of their immediate lifestyles.

Enter the Audubon Society, which provides a "lifestyle symbol" for the campaign: Birds. The Audubon Society is a credible information source for the claim that cutting the shade canopy to plant hardier, more economical Robusta beans destroys songbird habitat. This reduces the numbers of songbirds migrating to the back yards of North America. Here we have a symbol that easily connects an aspect of many North American lifestyles (pleasant singing visitors in millions of parks and back yards) with corporate images of coffee as an integral part of a satisfying consumer lifestyle.

How were songbirds connected to a corporate logo? The initial target of this campaign was Starbucks, a Seattle-based international company that successfully marketed its coffee as an upscale lifestyle brand. Not just a hot caffeinated beverage (which would be difficult to sell at premium prices in far-reaching markets), a cup of Starbucks is worth far more when understood as a lifestyle experience. Entering a Starbucks, puts one in a quiet world with quality product, surrounded by quality people, soothed by demographically chosen music (which can be purchased for home listening), and tempted by kitchen coffee gadgets to recreate the Starbucks lifestyle experience on mornings when one has to luxury of staying in.

Killing the songbirds that chirp in the back yard on that special Starbucks morning is not an image that the company wanted to have associated with its lifestyle brand. It did not take the company long to do the math. Today, Starbucks has extended its brand to include the fair trade logo that appears on some of its coffees. It even displays humanitarian posters in some (test-marketed) locations, explaining the company's dedication to paying a fair price to the small growers who produce the high quality beans on which the company's quality product depends. Thus, a political message that might

not have penetrated the personal symbol world of average consumers was attached successfully to a common consumer experience, and eventually embraced by one of the chief corporate purveyors of that experience.

Typical of many protest networks, the organization and communication activities of the campaign were accomplished mostly through the Internet. This is where the Organic Consumers Association comes in. OCA powers the website through which protest activities are scheduled, organized, and scaled worldwide. For example, OCA labor makes it possible for Starbucks customers and potential customers to find the campaign, and to email their indignation directly to Howard Schultz, founder and major shareholder of Starbucks, along with other company executives. What is the OGA problem with Starbucks? Not the disruption of small farm economies. Not the threat to bird populations. Rather, Starbucks has been using genetically altered soybeans in its vegan lattes, and milk with bovine growth hormone in its cappuccinos. OGA was able to attach its political messages to the fair trade and songbird discourses as people were brought through its website in the process of getting information, registering a virtual protest, or finding out about actual demonstrations.

As Starbucks expanded its locations around the world, the protest network followed with demonstrations. The web site of the OCA announced that the Global Week of Action against Starbucks (February 23- March 2, 2002) led by the Organic Consumers Association was a success, with demonstrations held at over 400 Starbucks locations worldwide. OCA claimed it as the largest simultaneous global protest event of its kind in history. Those demonstrations attracted activists motivated by one or more of the network causes. Despite the ideologically inchoate network, the collective negative focus on the

company image (reinforced by a number of news reports linking the demise of songbirds to the coffee business) was enough to convince Starbucks management that its precious brand image was better served by embracing the activists' demands than by resisting them. In this fashion, network actions travel over time and space, following global targets, while accommodating activists' diverse political identities and local community ties in the process.

Redefining Political Time and Space: New Venues for Contesting Power

For many global activists, the boundaries of the personal world -- social, political, and geographical-- are fluid. Global problems can be found in virtually any locality -- from the life conditions in export processing zones created in Mexico or Indonesia by distant corporations, governments and trade regimes, to the loss of migrating songbirds in American and Canadian back yards. Beck (2001) has argued that both the arenas and forms of politics have been dispersed as economic restructuring has given business unusual degrees of power over domestic labor, environmental, tax, and social welfare policies. Threats to move elsewhere, close plants, and shift capital markets have been legitimized by world trade agreements, creating a sphere of what Beck calls *subpolitics* in which important issues are removed from national institutional agendas. As a result, national election and legislative calendars may be less important for activists to follow than the schedule of World Trade Organization or G-7 meetings.

New communication technologies enable this resistance to occur in new temporal and spatial terms. Part of what made the "Battle in Seattle" during the 1999 meetings of the World Trade Organization such a signal event was the simultaneous staging of dozens

of other demonstrations around the world. Lichbach and Almeida (2001) document

demonstrations concurrent with Seattle in at least 82 other cities, 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.

The Internet was not just important in the organization of simultaneous protest, it contributed to the global imaging of those events. Demonstrations were linked by

streamed Indymedia reports by activists themselves –reports that tied the activists

together in a virtual political space. Mass media reports of the various local

demonstrations put them in the context of the global event that shut down the WTO

meetings in Seattle. Thus local actions were re-imaged in global network terms both for

the activists, and for the various global publics who witnessed them.

The capacity for simultaneous membership in local and global community again

implies that old Gramscian notions of class and group foundations of consciousness and

resistance must be refigured. Mittleman describes the technological refiguring of space,

time, and social identification in communication terms:

Contemporary social movements simultaneously occupy local, national,

transnational, and global space as a result of innovations in, and

applications of, technologies … which produce instantaneous

communication across traditional frontiers…The Gramscian framework of

resistance thus must be stretched to encompass new actors and spaces

from which counterhegemonic consciousness is expressed. (Mittleman

2000, p. 169)

At least three distinctive aspects of this cosmopolitan consciousness are associated with the global contention of power. First, and most obvious, this resistance is less distinctively nationalistic than global in character -- what Mittleman (2000, p. 169) terms "collective resistance transcending national borders." Second, the collectivism of this movement is less rooted in ascribed (Gramscian) social group memberships than in individual choices of social networks. Finally, this "collective individualism" is facilitated in part by discourses conceived less in ideological terms than in broad categories of threat, harm, and justice.

De-emphasizing ideological discourse also enables communication with broader "lifestyle publics" (Bennett, 2003b). The public political vocabulary of this movement is laden with *memes* –easily imitated and transmitted images that cross social networks because they resonate with common experiences, from enjoying the beauties of nature, to personal identifications with branded products (Dawkins, 1989, p. 192; Lasn, 1999). "Starbucks protects/harms songbirds" are good political memes (Bennett, 2003b, forthcoming). Where ideological communication restricts the flow of ideas to particular places (nations), groups (parties, unions, classes), times (elections) and spaces (party meetings, union halls), memes travel across the more fluid time and space possibilities of social networks and the Internet. An interesting example of this is the experience of a "culture jammer" named Jonah Peretti who visited the Nike Corporation shopping site and pushed the limits of its promised freedom to customize his personal Nikes by requesting that they send him shoes branded with the term *sweatshop*. Suddenly, Nike's promise of personal freedom was merged with the image of exploited workers in distant factories of Asia.

Peretti sent an email containing the amusing exchanges with Nike representatives (who repeatedly denied his requests) to a dozen friends, who forwarded the message to others. This "viral" communication spread exponentially until it was estimated to reach somewhere between several hundred thousand and fifteen million people around the globe (Peretti, 2001, p. 4). Culture jamming spreads ideas by playfully subverting the familiar ideas captured by popular cultural and commercial memes. Ideologies also rely on memes (for example, immaculate conception is a prime Christian meme), but ideology contextualizes memes to promote common understandings. When people in ideological movements differ in their interpretations of the core memes, the result is often factional segmenting or splitting. This contrast between culture jamming and more conventional ideology was evident in the reactions of some ideologues who received the Nike email and contacted Peretti as its originator. He explains the source of ideological discomfort with culture jamming as follows:

Culture Jamming is a strategy that turns corporate power against itself by co-opting, hacking, mocking, and re-contextualizing meanings. For people accustomed to traditional politics, Culture Jamming can seem confusing or even counter-productive. The following email is representative of the type of message I received from people who were uncomfortable with Culture Jamming:

Why do you want to support Nike and their immoral production of shoes and condemn them at the same time? I found your little dialogue immature and morally irresponsible. If you really think

that sweatshop labor is wrong, then don't buy Nike shoes.

(Peretti, 2001, p. 2).

Liberation from ideology creates the potential for crossing many social, cultural and geographical boundaries because there is less need for the education, indoctrination, or physical force that often accompanies the spread of ideologies. Culture jamming memes compress the time of communication because they require little repackaging before they are communicated again. The memes that run through global activism networks also travel well because they ride on cross-culture carriers produced by globalization itself: brands, movies, music, celebrities. Thus, Monsanto was universally pilloried when a small Canadian activist organization dubbed its genetically modified line of sterile seeds "The Terminator." Such message packages require little elaboration. If someone asks why Starbucks harms birds, the answer is deforestation. The Nike story can be reduced to a company branding itself around personal freedom yet exploiting its own (contract factory) workers.

The transmission model for "viral" or "swarm" communication is not the old two step flow from elites to group members, but a networked, distributed flow in which the communication format (the meme), the communication technology (personal digital media), and the social contact (network) travel in chaotic yet patterned ways. This, I think, is what Castells (1996) means when talking about the flow of spaces and the space of flows. Time and geography have been refigured by the introduction of new technologies and by the changing social boundaries that enable people to construct diverse social networks with those technologies. Following Dawkins (1989) formulation of memes, Peretti explained the global reach of his viral communication:

Dawkins explains that some memes have "high survival value" and "infective power" while other memes die out quickly. In the context of emails, this means that some messages get erased while others get forwarded. The Nike Sweatshop meme had success because it appealed to several different demographics, including Culture Jammers, union organizers, teachers, parents, anti-globalization protesters, human rights advocates, religious groups, and people who simply enjoy a humorous prank. The Nike Sweatshop email thrived because it had access to such a wide range of different **social networks**. (Peretti, 2001, p. 3).

Network Communication and Media Flows

Peretti's Nike adventure shows how radical messages can leap from the seemingly remote spheres of micro media (email, lists, personal weblogs) to mass media (newspapers, TV talk shows). Examples of micro-to-mass media crossover can be found in various anti-sweatshop campaigns against world brands such as GAP and Nike. In one of those campaigns, the global activist organization Global Exchange used the Internet to coordinate demonstrations that featured a speech by an Indonesian factory worker in front of Nike stores across the United States. Global Exchange then applied good old-fashioned publicity strategies to induce the press to cover and frame those demonstrations in terms consistent with the activists' own preferred messages. The result was that Nike's image in the American mass media shifted from a glowing success model for corporate

globalization to a sinister company with a dirty little labor secret (Bullert, 1999). Between 1996 and 1998, coverage of Nike in the leading American papers changed overwhelmingly from positive to negative. The company was virtually re-branded with the term sweatshop (Bennett, 2003b). In 1998, Nike CEO Phil Knight admitted that: "The Nike Product has become synonymous with slave wages, forced overtime, and arbitrary abuse." (Herbert, 1998)

The importance of the digital public sphere for contesting media power would be far less if it were sealed off from other communication channels in society. However, as noted above, the different media spheres are becoming increasingly porous. Researchers are beginning to pay attention to the pathways of from micro-to-middle media that bring important messages in contact with mass media gatekeepers. The distributed property of the Web makes it difficult for news organizations to close the gates on tempting stories that competitors will be tempted to report if they don't. The rise of 24/7 cable news operations makes the demand for novel information high.

Jonah Peretti described the travels of his Nike email exchange as it crossed from micro, to middle, to mass media. When reporters called him for interviews, he also interviewed them about their discovery of the story. They generally found it via email from trusted friends, or on weblogs or webzines that they frequented for entertainment and new ideas. Such news material represents a novel break from the journalistic routine of reporting news manufactured by government press offices, corporate public relations, and newsroom formulas. Peretti summarized the enthusiasm of journalists who contacted him:

…. many journalists find themselves covering carefully scripted press

conferences, or worse, converting corporate press releases into news

stories. The Internet provides these disgruntled journalists with an

opportunity to discover authentic stories. Reporter after reporter

"discovered" the Nike Sweatshop meme, either as an email forward or on

a site like Plastic.com, and it was clear from the tone of their voices that

they were excited by this process of discovery. (Peretti, 2001, p. 8).

Conclusion

People who have long been on the receiving end of one-way mass communication are

now increasingly likely to become producers and transmitters. With the advent of

interactive communication and information systems, from Indymedia to the future BBC,

the distinction between information producers and consumers will become increasingly

difficult to draw. Moreover, people who have experienced what Beck termed the

structural individuation of globalization are finding new ways of organizing collectively.

As experiments with global citizenship go forward, the empowerment offered by

distributed, networked digital communication may become shared more widely. This

warrants an important adjustment to media hegemony theories.

This theoretical adjustment does not contradict perspectives that see globalization

and deregulation of media content as direct threats to communicating diverse political

messages to large audiences (McChesney, 1999). Indeed, the idea of media democracy is

an increasingly important theme in global activist circles. Kalle Lasn (1999) of the

culture jamming, anti-commercial agency Adbusters (www.adbusters.org) has articulated

the notion of *media carta* as one of five "meta memes" for promoting planetary social justice. Lasn has encountered obstacles to running his *subvertisements* on commercial channels because broadcasters regard them as introducing dissonance into media environments that are carefully cultivated to support advertising (Lasn, 2002). Yet his organization's creative culture jams often make the mass media in other forms, akin to Peretti's Nike adventure above. These political openings are worth noting for what they reveal about the structure of media systems and their permeability

The long-term picture of new media/mass media information flows is hard to project with much precision. Mass media news outlets are struggling mightily with changing gate-keeping standards due to demands for interactive content produced by audiences themselves. As consumer-driven content progresses beyond chats and click polls, new possibilities arise for high quality political information governed by more democratic and less elite editorial standards. Technologically savvy activists are writing software that enables automated and democratic publishing and editing. Ordinary people are empowered to report on their political experiences while being held to high standards of information quality and community values. In the long run, these trends (see, for example, www.indymedia.org, and www.slashdot.org) may be the most revolutionary aspects of the new media environment.

Throughout this account, the Internet and other personal digital media have been a large part of the story. But the importance of these new media in contesting power involves more than just their sheer existence as new communication tools. The political impacts of emerging technologies reflect the changing social, psychological, and economic conditions experienced by citizens who use them.

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