

Rethinking political participation: Experiments in internet activism in Australia and Britain

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we've got a desert indymedia set up in the back of a truck, trying to keep stuff away from the dust which is ... flying around everywhere ... it is participatory media so anyone can come and write a story ... giving people here an unmediated voice for their perspective.

(Andrew, desert.indymedia)

Camped in the inhospitable Australian desert outside the Woomera refugee detention centre 500 km north of Adelaide, over 1,000 activists collaborated in an action against Australia's policy of mandatory detention of asylum seekers and its use of the inner desert as a dumping ground. The Woomera2002 auto-nomadic festival of freedom attracted international media attention as they physically pulled down the fences of the centre and helped several dozen refugees escape (Williams and Plane, 2002b). Internet and email were used extensively in both the organisation of the action(s), and in sharing the protests with the world direct through their own media.

Environmental and social justice activists¹ began using email and newsgroups in the late 1980s and by the mid 1990s several websites appeared publicising groups' campaigns (Young, 1993). The use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) by activists has since facilitated participation mobilisation, the co-ordination of actions and has been used as a tactical tool in itself (Lubbers, 2002). While activists face constraints to their use of ICTs – such as access problems, threats from on-line surveillance and corporate control, and the tensions of using environmentally damaging technology – many have been able to appropriate and subvert the technology to their advantage.

In addition to identifying the particular ways in which activists have benefited or struggled with the technology (for example, see Pickerill, 2001b), examination of activists' ICT use can be used to explore the extent to which ICTs facilitates groups who employ different organisational forms. Crucially, are some forms of activist networks or groups better able to benefit² from ICT use (in contrast to other environmental groups and/ or their political opponents) and thus level the playing field of politics?

Such questions require an examination of organisational form. Within environmental and social justice movements there is often an emphasis upon participatory democracy (of activist views within the formal political system and as reflected in the way activists organise amongst themselves). Thus analyses of components of these movements serve as an important comparison to some of the more institutionalised political structures explored in this book.

The core premise of this chapter is that the use of ICTs has disproportionately benefited small grassroots groups and individual activists linked only into fluid networks using cellular structures. It is these groups who often suffer from a lack of resources but were able to be more inventive in using the technology because of their ideology and free-flowing

organisational structure. Consequently they gained a temporary advantage over some other less inventive groups and moved towards making the components within environmental and social justice movements more equal to each other.

In this chapter two case studies representing different forms of activism are employed to investigate these questions. Research was undertaken in Britain and Australia³. The Woomera2002 actions were a temporary demonstration of a diffuse and fluid network that took place in the desert in Australia in March 2002, and Friends of the Earth (FoE) UK is a well established formal environmental lobbying organisation based in London, UK. For the purposes of this chapter the desert.indymedia network will be the main focus of analysis for the Woomera2002 case study. Composed largely of Melbourne and Brisbane independent media activists with a grounding in autonomous (and for some anarchist) principles, the indymedia⁴ group were the main employers of ICTs and were the focus for the distribution of activist media during and after the actions through the Melbourne indymedia website⁵. Furthermore, many of those involved in the desert.indymedia network had had core roles in the co-ordination and promotion of the Woomera2002 convergence. Thus the network was a crucial component of the actions.

Although both are located in similar environmental and social justice movements and aware of each other's existence⁶, they operate within different organisational and national contexts. Both Britain and Australia have vibrant and diverse environmental movements. Participants range from radical green activists who engage in direct action to strong professional lobby groups who are able to work closely with sectors of government (Rawcliffe, 1998; Doyle, 2000; Hutton and Connors, 1999). The traditions of these two countries also overlap, most obviously through the British colonialism of Australia from the eighteenth century which is reflected in Australian contemporary legislative structures, social and cultural practices, and continued role of the British monarchy in Australia. Furthermore, Australian and British environmental and social justice activists have shared a direct action repertoire, such as the use of lock-ons, tree-sits and tunnels⁷ and the use of 'manufactured vulnerability' (Doherty, 2000, p.62; Wall, 1999).

There are of course key differences too. Australia is governed under a Federal system which gives the eight states independent governments⁸ (Lovell *et al.*, 1995), and in comparison to Britain is a relatively new Federation which has yet to understand the needs and ways of its indigenous aboriginal population (Valadian, 1990; Wadley Dowley, 2000, Neill, 2002). Furthermore, the Australian Green Party has been successful in gaining a hold in parliamentary politics to the extent that in 'Western Australia the Greens won five upper house seats to hold the balance of power' (Barkham, 2001, p.7). This is in stark contrast to the lack of formal representation in parliament of the British Green Party. These differences

reflect in the ways activist groups choose to operate but there are also strong similarities between ICT utilisation irrespective of national context.

This chapter begins by appraising the current debates surrounding the impact of ICTs on political power struggles. Then the divergent organisational forms of activism are delineated. The two case studies are then examined in relation to the implications of ICT use for altering the processes of political leverage, with particular emphasis upon the influence of organisational form on the technology use.

POLITICS AS USUAL?

At first ICTs were presented by utopianists such as Rheingold (1994) as providing new spaces for social interaction free from the hierarchical and bureaucratic pressures of existing society. These democratic properties could also facilitate public participation in political processes, the bypassing of traditional government hierarchies, and aid the development of social cohesion (Tsagarousianou, 1998; Frederick, 1997). Boncheck (1995) argues that the formation of collective political action is facilitated by ICTs because the use of computer networks reduces transaction costs associated with organising collective action and thus levels the playing field of politics. He also notes, however, that current dynamics lead to unequal network access across social strata, which result in a domination of young, male, educated and affluent individuals using the internet and thus only some groups benefiting from its use. The use of ICTs can also contribute to an increase in marginalisation of sectors of society through the creation of intolerant 'purified communities' in on-line culture (Belt, 1998). Users of the ICTs bring with them their existing intolerances, such as racism or homophobia. Thus the internet remains a social space and cultural product that is as prone to as many antagonisms as any other (Froehling, 1997; Warf and Grimes, 1997; Cleaver, 1998).

With this unequal access and increasing infusion of existing social values and prejudices into cyberspace, Margolis and Resnick (2000) argue that existing political practices, leverage and power are mirrored on the Internet. The unequal access to resources is proposed as the cause of such normalisation. Resnick (1998) goes so far as to suggest that, 'for all their commitment to radical change, the presence of activists on the Net is part of the process of political normalisation ... they represent a familiar element of democratic pluralism' (p.65).

There is an alternate interpretation of what this 'pluralism' of political interests on the Internet represents. Rather than simply being a reflection of existing political variety, Bimber (1998) argues that ICTs enable a plethora of issue groups to operate without institutional support or structures and to mobilize quickly at low cost. This 'accelerated pluralism' would be fashioned by 'more rapid and more intense citizen responses to mobilization efforts by linkage groups' and 'the possibility of decreasing coherence and stability in interest group politics, as the group process loses some of its dependence on stable public and private

institutions' (Bimber, 1998, p.144). According to this understanding, activism via ICTs would remain centred around groups and networks (rather than lone individuals), but these linkages would be more diffuse, fluid, and short term, and the cycle of mobilisation and response would move more quickly.

The provision of more information and ability to increase communication does not lead to greater political participation in itself⁹ (Bimber, 2001). However, some forms of organisation, especially traditionally resource weak informal groups will find the use of ICTs particularly beneficial. The presence of other political actors on the Internet does not necessarily mitigate the political leverage to be gained by these smaller groups. Furthermore, political participation cannot be limited to comparisons with formal political parties or levels of government lobbying, but must include valuing the importance of activism at a grassroot and community level, and other avenues such as examining activists ability to gain political leverage through manipulation of the media (Rodgers, 2001; Scalmer, 2002).

In terms of participant mobilisation, most research has underlined the importance of existing inclusion in social movement networks and that this integration is dependent on face-to-face interaction (Wall, 1999; McAdam, 1988). Only occasionally can 'strangers' be mobilised through 'moral shocks' (Jasper and Poulson, 1995). Thus ICTs were predicted by Diani (2001) to aid groups requiring alternate resources in different ways. Accordingly, organisations mobilising mainly professional resources using ICTs, such as FoE, are able to create virtual communities¹⁰, but this does not affect mobilisation potential. In contrast, organisations mobilising mainly participatory resources requiring direct participation, such as those at Woomera2002, rely more upon face-to-face interaction and thus ICTs results in virtual extensions that maintain the importance of the existing networks. Groups could also benefit from ICT use by enhancing their ability to communicate effectively with increased speed, reduced costs and ease of interaction between an internationally dispersed network (see Pickerill, 2001a).

CONTRASTING FORMS OF ORGANISATION AND PRACTICES

Understanding the nature and impact of the internet on organizational culture will always involve locating its use firmly within the particular histories and geographies of the institutional arrangements of its control.

(Slevin, 2000, p.136)

Organisational form is often a reflection of the ideological, cultural or economic goals of its participants. There is no particular model of organisation, or unidirectional organisational evolution, which can be applied to social movements (Doyle and McEachern, 1998). There tends to be heterogeneity and plurality in the forms of organisation, a constant process of 'adopting, adapting, and inventing' (McCarthy, 1996). Social movement organisations tend to

favour decentralisation, participatory democracy, internal solidarity, and *ad hoc* short lived leadership. Organisational models have been differentiated by Doyle and McEachern (1998) according to the degree of organisation, distribution of power, and in the degree of commitment required from participants. These potential differences have resulted in a panoply of organisational forms, such as: local nuclei, umbrella organisations, party models, public interest groups, movement associations and supportive organisations (Della Porta and Diani, 1999).

Integral to the choice of organisational form for a group is an understanding of the strategy by which environmental protection or social justice can be achieved. There are multiple strategies for environmental change espoused by different ecological groups (Pepper, 1996). These strategies can reflect contrasting approaches to the value of democratic processes (Doherty and de Geus, 1996). Heilbroner (1974) and Ophuls (1977) appear to advocate authoritarianism in order to ensure comprehensive environmental protection and Goodin (1992) suggests that ‘it is more important that the right things be done than that they be done in any particular way or through any particular agency’ (p.120). Dobson (2000) reinforces this point by suggesting that:

the more democracy is understood to be government *for* the people rather than *by* the people, the more compatible with the objective-driven nature of green thinking it becomes.

(p.122)

There are, however, many links between environmentalism and a desire for a ‘particular sort of decentralised face-to-face democracy’ (Dobson, 2000, p.120), a form of participatory democracy and commitment to local politics which seeks involvement from as many individuals as possible in societal decisions¹¹ (Seel and Plows, 2000; McDonald, 2001). Furthermore, many environmentalists have deliberately emphasised the importance of openness, participation, decentralisation¹² and inclusion within their campaigning (Paehlke, 1988). In practice this has taken the form of ‘informal and non-hierarchical forms of organisation’ (Doherty et al., 2000, p.11). This is often evident in radical direct action networks such as Earth First! or associated groups whose principles included being ‘non-authoritarian, non-coercive and non-hierarchical’ and providing a ‘democratic space’ for participants (Anon, 1999a). The particular structure of such groups or networks varies between the idiosyncrasies of each space, but can include the use of affinity groups for coordination and actions:

The affinity group is not a form of organization that treats everyone the same, or a mode of action where people are required to make the same commitments The groups acts as a group, it has a task, but the basis of action lies in personal relationships and the recognition of the individuality

of each person.

(McDonald, 2001)

In this way different roles are taken on by participants of the affinity group, such as media spokesperson or first aider, but crucially there is a sense of trust and often a buddy system to ensure that everyone works together on a task and the goals of the group are achieved¹³ (Starr, 2000). In many ways an affinity group is a mechanism through which participatory democracy can more closely be practised through self-organisation, with spokescouncils¹⁴ being used to coordinate between affinity groups¹⁵. Alternatively, local environmental groups can run autonomously but be linked, guided and influence a central headquarters. This structure is more popular amongst large-scale membership non-governmental organisations (NGO's) (Rawcliffe, 1998).

Despite sharing a theoretical commitment to the ideals of participatory democracy, FoE UK and Woomera2002 practised it in disparate forms¹⁶. Woomera2002 auto-nomadic festival of freedom¹⁷ was a temporary manifestation of activists' networks to protest about refugees, anti-nuclear issues and the dispossession of indigenous lands. It has also been described as being 'an internet-assisted campaign' (Williams, 2002, p.4). It was an alliance of a variety of affinity groups¹⁸ which met in the desert and co-ordinated actions through spokescouncils. Consensus was not always reached because of the variety of affinity groups involved and in particular a clash with 'old left' centred forms of organising (x-trot, 2002)¹⁹. Unfortunately, this inability to reach a consensus was interpreted by some as a failure to take control and responsibility for their actions (Williams, 2002).

Predominantly, however, many affinity groups reflected the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) culture and networks of radical autonomous activists common in the non-violent direct action campaigns of forest and anti-globalisation activism in Australia²⁰ (Hutton and Connors, 1999; Doyle, 2000; Cohen, 1997; Burgmann, 1993). Such grassroots activism often operated in contention with more centred forms of organisation typified by Greenpeace Australia and the Australian Conservation Foundation. Overall there was an emphasis upon a non-hierarchical organisational structure that encouraged individual autonomy, expression and experimentation. There was no formal membership and the convergence was financed through personal commitment and donations.

In contrast to Woomera2002, FoE employ a hierarchical organisational structure, while still advocating staff participation in informing the strategic direction of the organisation. FoE UK was launched in London in 1971 and has become a particularly influential NGO in British politics (Lamb, 1996; McCormick, 1991). Although FoE UK's perspective is rooted in an ideology that radical political and social changes are required in order to avert further environmental destruction, its' choice of aims and tactics²¹ prevent it from being a radical environmental group²² (Rawcliffe, 1998; Wapner, 1995; McCormick, 1995).

It is composed of regional campaign co-ordinators and 250 local groups with a national office overseeing campaigns, but not determining local group activities (Doyle and McEachern, 1998). However, it is still criticised by more radical groups for being too centralised, hierarchical and bureaucratic. FoE's leadership is 'authoritative rather than representational' (Lowe and Goyder, 1983, p.53) and Jordan and Maloney (1997) propose that FoE members are simply passive *supporters* of the group, rather than active *members*. In this sense, they argue, FoE's internal structure is not democratic or participatory but is more akin to a 'protest business' and local groups have little influence upon decisions at Underwood Street. FoE launched their website (www.foe.co.uk) and email system in December 1994 and claimed to be the 'first environmental campaigning organisation with a presence on the Internet' (Pipes, 1996, p.63). FoE's use of ICTs has spanned almost seven years.

ALTERING PROCESSES OF POLITICAL LEVERAGE

The gold-rush to simply have a presence on the Internet is over and many organisations are now using the technology much more strategically, designing online campaigns around specific goals.

(Rodgers, 2001, p.4)

The ways in which ICTs are adopted and utilised within activist groups and networks reflects their existing organisational forms and ideologies. Moreover, the context in which ICTs are adopted is crucial in determining how it will be utilised, how quickly it is adopted and how innovatively it is employed. Available resources for use of ICTs are obviously a key stumbling block. Activists face a variety of access restraints: financial difficulties, differing skills attainment, and hardware and software problems are experienced by many. Such factors result in an uneven utilisation of the technology. However, both in FoE and Woomera2002 there were efforts to overcome these access problems by fundraising, (re)using old equipment, and limiting time on-line. Furthermore, at Woomera2002 access to ICTs were provided through a temporary indymedia centre²³ – computers rigged up in a truck at the protest camp – and there were attempts to share technical skills through informal exchanges²⁴. Activists also had to overcome the paradox of using advanced technology whose production and use has extensive environmental and social consequences.

The level of leverage that activist groups have in politics can be influenced by ICTs in several ways; *internally to the organisation* – through rapid interaction, convergence of communications, innovation through freedom to experiment, and challenging internal hierarchies, and *externally of the organisation* – through cohesion and swarming, and reducing containability. Each of these are now explored through the case studies.

Rapid interaction

Activists are able to use ICTs in increasing the speed and regularity of their communication, thus reducing the onus of distance. Furthermore, such rapidity can facilitate networking, improve response times and aid the gathering of information. The ability to generate support and mobilisation were also possible within a shorter time frame by providing an easy conduit through which to notify activists about events. Activists were able to interact at an international level quickly using ICTs during campaigns at FoE, especially on actions which involved regular communication with other chapters of FoE.

The value of speed was further illustrated in the distribution of activist media reports from Woomera2002. News about the events were published quickly and such information contributed towards the construction of a rapidly evolving storyline which was a collection of first hand accounts, links to mainstream news, transcripts of audio links, analysis, and contributions from people who weren't present:

It was unmediated ... the article went up and it was instantaneous, you didn't have to wait for the 7 o'clock news and wait for it to go through all the corporate filters.

(Barry, Brisbane indymedia²⁵)

In effect the actions and its consequences unfolded on the website in only a short lag from real time and posting continued throughout the night after the main actions.

Convergence of communications

ICTs have the potential to ease some of the stresses and strains that organisations and groups face during internal communication and co-ordination. By using ICTs to overcome organisational communication difficulties, the technology may contribute to improving the flow of information within a group and thus, potentially, aid its effectiveness in achieving its objectives.

FoE appeared to benefit from the convergence of communications. For example, Bell, a former FoE regional co-ordinator, identified time savings as a result of having a website which 'cuts out a lot of wasted time and misconceptions about what we do and certainly if you see the campaigns that we are involved with it avoids the general impression that FoE can help on everything' (Bell, FoE). FoE's intranet aided information co-ordination and discussion within the core of FoE (the head and regional offices). ICTs also facilitated an informality in forms of communication between departments, as email tends to be used to write short messages without the associated social graces that occur with face to face meetings, which in turn quickened the rate of exchanges. Despite this, and an increasing number of email public enquires, most requested information was only available as hardcopy,

so post had to be used in response. Furthermore, FoE's size and the large amount of information that it produced slowed its ability to update electronic information quickly²⁶.

This restricts its potential or effectiveness for use and render FoE unable to benefit fully from the speed and interactivity ICTs offers. Finally, FoE's use of ICTs to converge its communications was further limited by the sceptics within their ranks, 'I would see the internet as a necessary evil if you like. It's there so you've got to use it, but if there are other ways of getting the information I would use those alternative methods' (Packham, Newcastle FoE).

For the Woomera2002 convergence ICTs were used significantly prior to the protest festival in co-ordinating various affinity groups participation. ICTs were particularly useful in communicating across the large distances of Australia and across the various time zones²⁷. ICTs' facilitates the linking of participants of a disparate network without the need or cost of individual phone calls. It can also help prevent information getting lost or misinterpreted. Not only were emails used to co-ordinate amongst or between specific groups (while maintaining the importance of face to face meetings in mobilising participation²⁸), but there was a large central and regularly updated website. This not only outlined the issues, contacts and affinity groups but provided logistical information about campsites, health and legal support. There was also a 'rideboard' which linked together people looking for lifts and a countdown which helped build a sense of momentum towards the commencement of the protest.

Innovation through freedom to experiment

It's not the boys with the most money who make the difference – it's the boys and girls with the most imagination.

(Jessy, McSpotlight, quoted by Meikle, 2002, p.180)

A lack of rigid organisational structure has enabled many activists to feel free to experiment with different uses of ICTs. In comparison, more formally hierarchically structured environmental organisations have a greater number of stages through which to gain approval of the use of a technology, which may in turn slow down or restrict its adoption of ICTs. Although FoE started using ICTs relatively early, this was due to the commitment and enthusiasm of a few individuals who did not seek formal permission (and constructed the website in their spare time). Had they done so, Weatherley (former FoE IT manager) suggests 'I would have been chewed out by several management team members', stalling FoE's use of ICTs as a result of senior staff 'techno-innocence' (Burt, 1999). The subsequent request for official funding was hindered by the need to appeal to those in the chain of command which caused resentment by those wanting to develop ICTs use further:

I think FoE should have grabbed it by the reins a lot sooner ... we lost a hell of a lot of ground that we'd got because FoE just would not invest in the

internet, and it's almost not until almost everyone else has that they see the need.

(Pipes, former FoE GIS co-ordinator)

FoE decided to outline boundaries on ICT use, such as suggested email etiquette and protocol, thus constraining use within policy guidelines. This is not to say that FoE have not used the technology in innovative and novel ways but that the ambitions of some of its staff were constrained by the organisational structure. FoE were also constrained in that ICT adoption required significant financial investment for an organisation of their size. Moreover formal groups, such as FoE need to retain a control over their image and the activities of their staff and might not have felt as comfortable with ICTs because they were not able to control their use as much as they would have liked and consequently felt threatened by it (c.f. Mobbs, 2000).

In contrast, the more loosely structured groups, such as Woomera2002, with significantly less funding were able to rely upon using what resources they had available and for those with access to experiment. Activists were able to utilise a small amount of technology to make a big impact, without having to worry about organisation policy. In networks such as Woomera 2002, consensus was not required before people took action. Those groups whose structure has enabled rapid and experimental adoption of ICTs have consequently often used the technology in particularly innovative ways.

The indymedia format itself is innovative, indymedia 'software represents a confluence of interests, influences and experiences which makes it, in many ways, the state of the art in Internet activism' (Meikle, 2002, p.89). The site is organised using an open publishing model²⁹ which enables any user to upload their story or viewpoint onto the website with minimal editorial interference³⁰ (Arnison, 2001). The website format also enabled an easy melding of publication types – text, audio, photographic and cartoons – to be posted alongside each other³¹. A particularly innovative aspect of ICT use at Woomera2002 was the development of the PIMP system – the Phone indymedia Patch System:

PIMP is basically like an answering machine for indymedia. You dial the PIMP number, then go through the voice menu, selecting the appropriate options, and then leaving a message after the tone. This message is then turned into an MP3 file, automatically uploaded to indymedia.

(Nik, desert.indymedia³²)

This meant that reports could be uploaded to indymedia without accessing a computer. Consequently there were several MP3 audio reports recording as the actions took place, which were then available on-line within minutes. It also enabled detainees within the centre to communicate and contribute to the debates, 'there were actually a couple of phone calls from

people inside Curtin [detention centre] who were doing solidarity actions' (Barry, Brisbane indymedia)³³. Systems such as PIMP are ground-breaking and all the more so for being developed with little money by volunteers. Furthermore, the sites are designed using open software which facilitates the development of new ideas by enabling source code to be freely shared, copied and enhanced by a variety of enthusiasts³⁴ (de Silva, 2001).

This freedom is especially relevant to the use of ICTs because its use has spread so rapidly. In order to use the technology to their advantage, activists have had to utilise the opportunities quickly, and what was deemed an innovative and novel (and thus attention grabbing) use of the technology quickly becomes standard.

Hierarchies: nuclei, formalisation and subversion

The way in which ICT' use affected organisational structures depended upon their existing form. Many activist groups face a continuous pressure to formalise and to evolve into more rigid (often hierarchical) organisational forms. This is often due to the need to solve resource issues, overcome communication problems, provide a more united image or an attempt to reach a larger audience. Traditionally grassroots or direct action campaigns have been viewed as temporary. Over time they either dissipate or develop into a more formal organisation fighting for their original or broader cause. In the latter case this formalisation tends to result in oligarchy and the associated problems of added bureaucracy and hierarchical decision making structures (Doyle, 2000). This section outlines how clusters of individuals developed control around ICT use. Despite this, ICTs were able to facilitate activists' attempts to subvert the development of hierarchies. Where hierarchies already existed, however, ICTs did little to subvert them.

For Woomera2002 many strove to operate using non-hierarchical methods, using affinity groups and spokescouncils to prevent oligarchies developing and enabling decisions to be made collectively with all participants having an equal influence (though there was criticism of whether such an approach actually worked in practice³⁵). However, even in groups that appear to have few organisational structures, informal or latent hierarchies develop around some tasks, often as a result of skill differentials or because some members had been involved for longer than others (Freeman, 1970):

working in a small group is really quite functional and once you find a group of people that you like to work with maybe you don't want to open it up anymore.

(Rosa Deluxembourg, Melbourne spacekids³⁶)

Prior to the desert camp being established at Woomera, there were only a few people directly involved in Melbourne indymedia, 'there is no real indymedia collective, there's a couple of individuals ... no-one really wanted to form a group' (Sam, Melbourne media activist). The

desert.indymedia collective formed with three people and grew to ten once at Woomera. It involved a collaboration of activists from a variety of Australian indymedia groups. There were no designated leaders or management chains of responsibility³⁷. Rather the collective developed around who wanted to be involved³⁸, ‘there’s no hierarchy, there’s no news team, there’s just a space for everyone to do their own thing (Barry, Brisbane indymedia).

Due to access problems the indymedia site was uploaded via a hotel room and a local ISP, but for security reasons only a few people knew of this process, ‘no one outside of a small collective knew about the location for the uploads – we wanted to keep it as secure as possible’ (Nik, desert.indymedia). The decision to restrict knowledge of this space was made by the smaller collective and enforced on later participants, ‘as more people came on board it was explained why we did things this way, not everyone was happy, but about six people uploaded from the space’ (Nik, desert.indymedia).

In this way, despite being a non-hierarchical group, the use of ICTs triggered the development of a cluster of those individuals who were most involved in the use of the technology³⁹. An informal nucleus surrounded the use of ICTs and subsequently in many ways controlled its implementation. Such clusters do not represent a hierarchy as there were no chains of command, but still serve a similar purpose to an oligarchy, the control over the use of ICTs by a small number of people.

In an action such as Woomera2002 hierarchies can develop around several issues: who maintains and understands the on-line linkup of the indymedia centre, who gains access to the limited number of computers, if any editorial control is operated and thus whether some posts get removed, and what posts get linked to through the features section of the website. There were many practical issues of running a news service from the desert that might also have influenced the ways nuclei formed. The thick red dust, power supply issues, confrontation with police and the Australian Protective Services (APS) (who attempted at first to take down the protesters camp), and the disparate groups being involved, all lead to a pressured situation.

In addition there were a limited number of participants with technical skill, ‘there’s a lot of pressure on those people, for one thing, and we’re totally reliant on them ... it all makes it quite fragile’ (Adam Data, Dorks Advocating Total Anarchy⁴⁰). There have been attempts to share knowledge of how to use indymedia, initially they went to ‘training weekends and he brought his laptop and showed people how to upload stuff’ (Alex, Melbourne indymedia), but technical skill sharing was still limited in Melbourne⁴¹.

Hierarchies can also develop around the process of editorial control. Although the Melbourne indymedia site (which desert.indymedia participants were posting to) utilises an open publishing broadcast model, a few posts have in the past been hidden (while still being available on the administrative interface):

The only times that we have hidden a story is when someone's published someone's personal address or when someone's published something that has impersonated someone else and it's obvious that it's an impersonation.

(Sam, Melbourne media activist)

Posts are occasionally removed ... I've used my discretion and taken down two sentences of ... swearing ... but only very occasionally. Like the stuff was just so extreme like no-one's going to complain.

(Adam Data, Dorks Advocating Total Anarchy)

Even this limited editorial interference caused debates about 'where's the line, how do you define who can take it down and then who are they accountable to ... how do you define what is not the right content for the website?' (Alex, Melbourne indymedia). Consequently, Melbourne indymedia have developed decision making processes and outlined how the editorial collective operate using modified consensus⁴² with the aim of providing 'an unmoderated, open-publishing newswire' (Anon, 2002e) which helps prevent hierarchies of access to knowledge, debate and contributions developing.

At Woomera2002 the radicalness of the actions meant that some information (such as the locations of escaped refugees) was sensitive and thus did not get published on-line. Most activists were aware of this precaution, but in addition the people 'who were uploading media were aware of those issues and if something was incriminating they wouldn't publish it, and go back to that person ... and just discuss with them the issues' (Barry, Brisbane indymedia). Furthermore, the open publishing newswire stream is restricted to one side of the screen⁴³. The central column contains an edited features written by members of the collective section where storylines are pieced together through summaries of the latest news and links to favoured postings.

Despite the existence of these nuclei ICTs have helped groups maintain their non-hierarchical networks. By easing the processes of communication, the need for formal structures or centralised offices are reduced. Individuals are able to communicate cheaply and regularly through ICTs without necessarily meeting face to face, or by formalising the contact. ICTs enabled networks to remain fluid and loose, and to adapt to the changing involvement of different participants. It also provided a cheap medium through which to attract participants and co-ordinate their contributions. ICTs provides a medium through which the group can remain visible even if there are few participants, little activity is taking place or they are low on funds. Their web presence can continue to evolve at whatever pace participants choose, but does not fade when not attended to. Thus ICTs are a medium where activists can be fluid and non-linear, where they can move onto other projects and yet still maintain their initial campaign, such as the indymedia site. This fluidity enables campaigns to be dynamic for longer as they do not become constrained by the resource issues that so many activists face.

A test for the exclusivity of the nuclei is the extent to which non-collective members take part in projects such as desert.indymedia. With open access through the indymedia truck ‘there were a lot of people who used it who aren’t actively involved in infrastructure in indymedia’ (Barry, Brisbane indymedia), and there were a large number of postings to indymedia during and after the actions. The desert.indymedia collective were also making a conscious effort to breakdown hierarchies by eroding the distinction between activists and journalists; ‘for melb.indy there is no distinction, we don’t ‘cover’ events, we set up the conditions for people to cover them themselves. We also upload to indymedia, but we do so as activists, not journalists’ (Nik, desert.indymedia)⁴⁴. Other participants did not perceive this cluster of individuals around the technology as intentional or exclusive, and there was a feeling that people were free to become involved. This was aided by the reflexivity of collective members who tried to resolve their privileged positioning:

power is something that we don’t think and talk about enough in any sphere, just power of access and knowledge and confidence ... if I have power and access then my responsibility is to help someone else gain that space as well or use that space to create more spaces and it’s not necessarily squashing anyone else if I’m trying to create more space.

(Alex, Melbourne indymedia)

One of the ways in which hierarchies can be subverted is through impermanency. The Woomera2002 group was ‘only going to exist up until we go out to Woomera and then it’s not going to exist anymore’ (Alex, Melbourne indymedia). While the Melbourne and Brisbane indymedia collectives were longer standing there was an emphasis upon fluidity, ‘there’s always that feel to formalise what you’re doing ... I think amateurism’s really important’ (Nik, desert.indymedia).

In addition to ICTs being used by non-hierarchical groups to retain their forms of organisation, the technology has been accredited with flattening existing hierarchical structures (Walch, 1999). FoE’s hierarchy was challenged by the use of ICTs at the same time as being maintained and reinforced by it. The use of ICTs by FoE facilitated greater flows of communication between those in head office, regional offices and London. This streamlining of communications was also facilitated by the development of the intranet and enabled a campaign to be based in (and co-ordinated from) Leeds⁴⁵ which further challenged the dominance of London. ICTs eased previous communication problems between local groups:

it’s never been feasible to ring round all these groups ... this is so much easier because I just write one message and it goes out to about twenty different groups round the country.

(Welch, Newcastle FoE co-ordinator)

Although ICTs could have helped FoE improve local group networking amongst themselves and for such groups to become ‘information hubs’ this did not happen (Burt, 1999). There has always been a concerted effort by national FoE to encourage local networking – particularly through the funding of regional campaign co-ordinators. ICTs may aid this process but did not trigger it (Washbourne, 2001). ICTs have been used to share information, especially through the campaign specific email discussion lists, but barriers remain to inter-group communication and especially to sustained dialogue. The information networks still flow primarily via the head office, rather than between local groups. Thus the possibility of a non-hierarchical national network between local FoE groups seems limited. The use of ICTs actually maintains the central London head office as the hub of all information flows. Furthermore, the official stages through which information has to pass in order to be published on the national FoE website reinforces the hierarchical structure of the organisation onto any use of ICTs. The differing levels of access to ICTs available to staff also maintained the hierarchical structure by reinforcing the present division of resources. Mobbs (2000) suggests that with ICTs, decentralisation of centralised organisations becomes inevitable. At FoE, however, there remained many barriers to changing their hierarchical structures.

The traditional need to centralise (to benefit from economies of scale) was reduced by ICTs which enabled cheap, fast, decentralised communication between participants. Although ICTs increased and eased communication flows around the FoE UK network (incorporating head office, regional offices and local groups), the importance of the hierarchical network was maintained. Not only do the stages through which website content is decided preserve the traditional hierarchies, but email has predominantly been used to exchange information between central office, regional office and local groups in a linear fashion, rather than to subvert the hierarchy by using ICTs for inter-group dialogue. Thus, ICTs has not been proven to promote the circumvention of existing formal hierarchies.

Working together: Strengthening the cohesion of networks and swarming

One of the main advantages of utilising ICTs are in their ability to aid networking with other activist groups, aid mobilisation, and generate collective and cohesive campaigns (for example in organising big actions such as that at Woomera2002). This can also help strengthen cohesion between those involved in environmental and social justice struggles and extend links to other political activists. Furthermore, ICTs can be utilised as a component in multiple tactics that can be swarmed upon a target simultaneously.

Although many groups attempt to use ICTs to mobilise participation in their campaigns – enabling a wider audience to be reached and at less cost than through traditional channels – the value of ICTs is hard to discern because of the use of multiple methods to attract participants, and the importance of non-ICTs methods is often retained. Thus the use of ICTs did not particularly increase the ability to mobilise participation in protest events within

existing environmental groups or like-minded cliques (because there are already adequate networks). Rather, ICTs served to reinforce the *strength* of existing network ties and enable quick and cheap communication within them.

A specific example of the use of ICTs by FoE to communicate with other organisations was the development of the URGENT (the Urban Regeneration and Greenfield Environment NeTwork) website set up by Festing (FoE's former housing campaigner). It was a separate autonomous site from FoE and has information from a variety of different organisations, including FoE, CPRE and direct action groups. Its aim was to provide a comprehensive overview of the housing debate in the UK and links to different groups:

it's basically about a spirit of co-operation because one of the lessons we learned from the anti-road movement was ... Friends of the Earth ... needs to co-operate with other groups, and it needs to be seen to be doing that in a way which is not pushing our weight around.

(Festing, FoE)

Furthermore, the Real Food campaign co-ordinated extensively with non-FoE groups mostly via email.

For Woomera2002 the main website served as a focal point for co-ordinating a disparate collection of groups prior to the convergence. Furthermore, by channelling activists' news reports to the Melbourne indymedia website, part of a global independent news network with a recognisable and easy to find URL, activists were contributing to the general cohesion of on-line media activism. The connections made through ICTs gave the comfort of solidarity to activists (Cleaver, 1998). This increases the ability of activists to network on a global scale and for wider social movements to emerge out of such coalitions. Other links outside the movement facilitate the cross fertilisation of alternative ideas and the sharing of skills⁴⁶. ICTs have also strengthened existing networks as they offer another media for communication. This is especially useful for radical activists who lead slightly transitory lives and do not have a permanent base for mail or phone.

Hack attacks, hacktivism (hacking with a political motive) and other forms of on-line activism such as virtual sit-ins have also been used in addition to existing forms of lobbying (Wray, 1998). However, the most effective tactics combine on-line activism with existing forms of protest – to *swarm* targets with several techniques being used simultaneously. This was evident at Woomera2002 through physical action occurring at the same time as people posted reports and analysis to the indymedia site, and virtual interaction through the Virtual People Smuggler⁴⁷. The indymedia centre enabled activists to have directorship over the representation of their cause and actions, to distribute their media quickly and to an international audience. This helps activists add to opponents' woes by not only conducting an

action, but being able to advertise their success afterwards. On-line participation was encouraged through the Virtual People Smuggler:

a space for people who were unable to physically attend to partake in
some way. So people sort of wrote pieces, messages of solidarity, that sort of
thing, I think it was just an outlet for people who couldn't come.

(Barry, Brisbane indymedia)

Although the virtual presence did not actually involve a targeted action, participants were able to join an on-line tactical bloc (which represented the “levels of confrontation in relation to the prohibited zone around the Woomera internment camp: orange = high; purple = medium; blue = low” Anon, 2002f), express their views about the physical actions occurring and communicate with each other. The freedom of ICTs to exist beyond the barriers of national borders, “confined neither by geopolitical limits nor the standard aesthetics of protests, the Virtual People Smuggler pays tribute to the chatrooms, spoof sites, weblogs, online gaming, independent media as virtual, vital and, therefore, actual moments in the crossing of borders” (Lovink, 2002).

Containability

The ability to contain activists' concerns and publicity of their protests is reduced through the use of ICTs. Activists' views can be disseminated more freely and to a wide audience partly because of the current inability to regulate or curtail ICT use. There was a constant stream of diffuse and disparate updates of news and discussion from Woomer2002 via the indymedia website. This was especially significant given the location of the festival, near a remote town in the desert, it would have been relatively easy for news of the action to be contained⁴⁸. With multiple authors and opinions, the activists were able to represent the complexity of the action and its participants. This was in contrast to the mainstream media use of language (using terms such as ‘riot’, ‘stormed’, ‘wild clashes’ and accusing ‘protesters spat blood and threw bottles of urine at police during violent demonstrations’ Larkin and Stevens, 2002, p.3) which depicted many participants as extremists⁴⁹ (Williams and Plane, 2002b; Anon, 2002c; Anon, 2002d). Moreover, many of the PIMP audio reports were with refugees who had escaped and were being harboured by the activists. These not only provided credence to the claims of success by the activists, but served to further humanise the reports of refugees plight, and reduce the ability of the government to manipulate the stories about refugees motivations and conditions in the detention centres. This immediacy of the activist news might have helped influence the interpretations given by mainstream media. The use of PIMP could also bypass any attempts at preventing access to the internet or indymedia, ‘we actually had the facility to do emergency uploads via mobile phone ... but at the same time the PIMP system would have been just as good’ (Barry, Brisbane indymedia)⁵⁰.

Despite this variety of on-line publication, however, most information was distributed through the one indymedia website. Although the indymedia brand is global and has received coverage from mainstream media sources, there remains issues over how wide the audience might be and whether users are able to see beyond the ‘walled gardens’ of choices created by ISP portals (Malina, 1999). As ‘a constructive space where you’re actually trying to communicate to audiences that aren’t necessarily familiar with the issues of activism I think open publishing needs to be questioned a little bit’ (Sam, Melbourne media activist). Furthermore, not all news could be reported, because communication could have jeopardised the freedom of the escaped refugees, thus ‘there’s some things I don’t want to say because I would think it would compromise the safety of some of the actions that have taken place ... I just think they might be stories that may never get out’ (Alex, 2002).

Groups are able to maintain their non-hierarchical forms of organising, sustaining a nomadic form of power and centre-less organisation which is hard to target by the centred state authorities and hierarchical multinational organisations, thus further reducing containability. This is particularly important when opponents have tried to exercise power over some NGO’s by attempting to seize assets. FoE had to withdraw from the Twyford Down actions in 1992 because such an injunction was imposed on them (Lamb, 1996). In contrast it is virtually impossible to identify individuals or assets of loosely defined horizontal networks.

Levelling the playing field

It doesn’t operate as a totalising and hierarchical organising tool. It’s a device for sharing information through networks which emphasises decentralised and autonomous actions.

(Nik, desert.indymedia)

Activists who are able to gain access to ICTs have been able to increase the speed of their interaction, integrate a variety of media in innovative ways, strengthen the cohesion of their contacts, and develop novel on-line tactics. Although it is difficult to measure the before and after effects of ICT use, more political leverage is gained by non-hierarchical grassroot groups (such as Woomera2002) than formalised NGOs (such as FoE UK). This is because ICTs help reduce the importance of resources for smaller groups. ICTs enable cohesion of disparate networks through the ease and speed of communication – which corresponds to the loose affinity model structure of direct action movement. By facilitating the internal and external cohesion, the operating and organisational ability to collectively organise large-scale protests is improved.

Moreover, ICTs aid groups ability to resist formalisation, therefore maintaining the participatory democracy project and leaving power with the individuals making consensus decision making. Furthermore, convergences such as Woomera2002 have illustrated that

participatory democracy models of organisation can work⁵¹. There were many successful elements of the Woomera2002 actions and the use of ICTs played an important role in many crucial aspects – in aiding the co-ordination of the convergence and in quickly disseminating news and discussion of the actions⁵². The Woomera2002 network was able to remain fluid, loose and dynamic and retain a web presence even when participation or resources were low. Using the desert.indymedia case study it has been illustrated that although resources are necessary for ICT utilisation, it is inventiveness, enthusiasm and adaptability which are vital and it is these attributes which are encouraged in non-hierarchical grassroots networks.

Previously, established NGO's formed in order to benefit from economies of scale by harnessing the resources necessary to co-ordinate large scale actions or lobbying campaigns. Using ICTs, however, groups are able to subvert the need for centralisation (in office space, for newsletter production etc) and physical manifestation (as in the physical presence of activists) (Kellner, 1999). Thus they are also able to bypass the bureaucratic implications of formalisation. The larger NGO's are actually less able to benefit from the spontaneity offered by the new technology because of the tradition of centralisation and top-down control over decision-making and operations. The consequence of this trend is the increased political leverage gained by small activist groups.

The importance of national context is hard to delineate using these case studies. However, in these cases the most influential factors were not institutional, political or social structures, but the activists' ideology of participatory democracy which shaped the ways in which they sought to utilise ICTs. In this way there appear to be similar enduring trends even in different national contexts.

Margolis and Resnick (2000) assert that 'those who have been powerful in the past – the established organizations, the wealthy, and the privileged – are moving into cyberspace and taking their advantages with them' (p.208). There are certainly threats to the political leverage gained by activist networks. ICT use is increasingly being normalised by large-scale mass utilisation and the influx of corporate ownership. This commercial commodification not only restricts the free spaces available to activists but increases the possibility of surveillance by both the state and those wishing to profit from ICTs. Activists have attempted to subvert such interference by using encryption, foreign hosts and being aware that what they post on-line may be read or under surveillance. In addition, activists are using ICTs in a similar way to their radical appropriation of some physical spaces (for example, the Reclaim the Streets practice of occupying roads and holding parties in the middle of motorways). By claiming their own virtual spaces, developing their own brands of media (such as indymedia) activists can seek to simply maintain parallel spaces to those of corporates and continue in their experiments of participatory democracy.

CONCLUSIONS

The cases examined in this chapter have made conscious efforts to employ ICTs in a certain way, which reflects and is reflected in their organisational form. Slevin (2000) suggests several strategies of using ICTs to facilitate organisations' ability to succeed in the uncertain complexity of modern society. Of these, he supports Giddens proposal of 'opening out' organisations and making them more inclusive using 'the internet to facilitate and incorporate active bottom-up alliances' (p.139). Thus, in effect, moving closer towards models of participatory democracy advocated by the more radical activist groups. While he argues against total inclusion⁵³ there is an acknowledgement that moving away from hierarchical models is necessary for organisational survival, and thus perhaps survival for political structures too.

When examining the possibility of participatory democracy through Internet activism the context of this chapter has been very specific. This is necessary if we are to look past theoretical generalisations and explore practical experiments. Furthermore, the particular context of environmental campaigning (and social justice to a lesser extent) tends to be dominated by individuals who although maybe resource weak in terms of capital investment, are not necessarily marginalised in society but can come from privileged social locations – often being white, middle class, and tertiary educated (for further discussion see Tranter, 1996).

While direct democracy for *all* citizens is unlikely to be achieved, certain networks are able to move towards practices of participatory democracy using ICTs. Manifestations such as Woomera2002 contributed to the refugee debate within Australia (and internationally), enabled several hundred of its citizens to make their opinions clearly heard, and ICTs significantly contributed to their ability to achieve this. In contrast, FoE UK were less successful at encouraging participatory networks to develop, but have still used ICTs in innovative and advantageous ways. Thus, I am not suggesting that all small activist groups can benefit in similar ways from such ICT use. Rather, that in certain contexts where access, skills and knowledge are present, activists organising in small scale autonomous groups can use ICTs more effectively than more established lobbying organisations. This has implications not just for the way political participation is examined, but for the value that is placed on hierarchically structured organisations when faced with rise of fluid, hard to contain, grassroot mobilisations.

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NOTES

¹ The definition of an ‘environmentalist’ is diffuse, with an increasingly number of social justice issues being taken onboard by what were traditionally explicitly environmental organisations. As Vidal (2002) notes ‘it is now a very broad social movement seeking social and ecological change – the very label ‘environmentalist’ is now almost meaningless’ (p.13). Friends of the Earth UK are a case in point. One of their main campaign priorities in May 2002 was ‘challenging corporate power’, which clearly has environmental implications but is also concerned with issues of equality, fair trade and community. Furthermore, issues concerned with genetic engineering are being framed as both environmentally destructive and socially unfair to farmers, indigenous communities and consumers (Purdue, 2000).

² This ‘benefit’ could be in the form of overcoming traditional hinderances to campaigning (such as costs, physical distance between activists, lack of access to an audience), being able to mobilise participation more effectively, developing novel tactics or being able to publish their own media more widely.

³ The data for these case studies was collated through in-depth face-to-face interviews undertaken with participants in Britain and Australia, and from secondary sources such as group literature, publications and media reports. British fieldwork was performed between June 1997 and June 1999. Australian fieldwork was undertaken between March 2001 and March 2003.

⁴ The indymedia network is a global network of alternative media websites. The global website is www.indymedia.org, with over 70 regional centres across the world, each with their own websites fashioned from the original model (Hyde, 2002; Rosner, 2002; Meikle, 2002; Scalmer, 2002). The Melbourne indymedia website was set-up during the protests against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne, September 2000 (Gibson and Kelly, 2000).

⁵ Footage and stories from Woomera2002 were posted onto the Melbourne indymedia site - www.melbourne.indymedia.org. Additional footage and discussion was also posted onto the Brisbane indymedia site – www.brisbane.indymedia.org.

⁶ Friends of the Earth Australia is a radically different organisation from its British counterpart, operating using a non-hierarchical grassroot participation model, its volunteers are often involved in the organisation of radical protest such as Woomera2002.

⁷ Tree-sits were adopted in Britain after inspiration from their use in Australian rainforest campaigns in the late 1990’s (Doherty, 2000). In 2001 tunnels were adopted in Australian forest protests in East Gippsland, Victoria, after instruction by British activists visiting Australia (as shown to the author on a visit to Goolengook protest camp, August 2001).

⁸ Federalism means that activists can attempt to assert their influence on both their State government and the Federal government. In certain key campaigns, such as the Franklin Dam protests in 1983 and efforts to prevent the logging of the South West forests of Western Australia in 2001, activists were able to mobilise state voting power around the specific campaigns to lead pro-environmental parties to power, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in each case (Doyle, 2000; The Wilderness Society, 2001).

⁹ Bimber argues ‘the only form of participation which is demonstrably connected to Internet use is donating money’ (2001, p.53).

¹⁰ ‘Virtual communities’ refers to networks which are not based on any face-to-face interaction and have been formulated entirely through ICTs.

¹¹ The emphasis upon participatory democracy is also evident in government. A feature of current society is what Giddens, Beck and Lash term ‘reflexive modernisation’ which includes a move towards a more encompassing form of government whereby those in power are seen to react to its citizens needs and desires more closely than previously. These attempts at deliberative democracy are encapsulated in Tony Blairs’ emphasis upon directly responding to public issues are reflected in attempts to ‘promote deliberative democracy and a greater transparency of their activities, thereby seeking to mobilize active trust in their performance through discussion and the interchange of views with diverse individuals and organisations’ (Slevin, 2000, p.20).

¹² Many environmentalists call for a decentralised (or ‘relocalized’ (Starr, 2000)) sustainable society where ‘nothing should be done centrally if it can be done equally well, or better, locally’ (Green Party Manifesto for a Sustainable Society, 1999, p.100, quoted by Dobson, 2000, p.106).

¹³ ‘An affinity group is a group of people who have an affinity for each other, know each others strengths and weaknesses, support each other, and do (or intend to do) political/ campaign work together’ (Anon, 2002a).

¹⁴ A spokescouncil is a forum for delegates from affinity groups to ‘discuss actions, enable co-operation and share information between lots of different groups. Decisions made at the spokescouncil are not binding – which means that any decisions of the meeting as a whole are only given effect if there is consensus’ (Anon, 2002b).

¹⁵ For example, during the anti-WTO Seattle protests in 1999, Starr (2000) observes, ‘groups with different messages, tactics and skills coexisted without attempting centralized organising ... the anarchist alternative to bureaucratic top-down systems’ (p.116).

¹⁶ These two case studies are only examples of the forms that environmental groups can take, many variations exist between the two extremes of form represented here.

¹⁷ More information is available at www.woomera2002.com.

¹⁸ Some of the affinity groups present included: Boatpeople, desert.indymedia, No One is Illegal, Pt’Chang, Refugee Rights Action Network and xborder.

¹⁹ How to work in the presence of Socialists (such as the Socialist Worker Party and Democratic Socialist Party) is one of the main internal conflicts of recent global protest events in Britain and Australia (Anon, 2001; Anon, 1999b).

²⁰ However, Woomera2002 was essentially a mix of environmental and social justice campaigning. The debate about refugees has become much more than a social justice issue in Australia – debates have raged over what population Australia can support and its environmental limitations. It was also similar to anti-nuclear campaigns, such as that centred around the Jabiluka uranium mine in the Northern Territories, which combined environmental concerns with aboriginal lands rights and welfare issues. The mine was also located in remote bush land which presented similar logistical issues for activism as the remote Woomera location.

²¹ FoE’s strategy has been five pronged; (1) the use of political lobbying and legislative activity, (2) scientific research and information provision, (3) employing the media, (4) the mobilisation of the public through local groups, and (5) co-ordination and co-operation with other groups (see Pickerill, 2001b, for more details).

²² Its aversion to the use of illegal direct action and its emphasis upon political lobbying and legislative activity contrasts with more radical environmental groups such as Earth First!. FoE UK has also been criticised for not having a deep green philosophy (Lamb, 1996).

²³ Though this temporary centre itself raised logistical issues – dealing with the heavy police presence (the activists were trespassing by establishing their camp near the detention centre), generating power, finding a landline – all on a low budget.

²⁴ Adam Data (Dorks Advocating Total Anarchy) noted ‘we’ve had a few people contact us with technical questions and wanting to learn some programming or set up their server. So we’re going to organise a Linux workshop’.

²⁵ Barry is speaking as a participant of the Brisbane indymedia collective but not as a representative.

²⁶ Festing, a former housing campaigner noted: ‘it takes us so long to get stuff on our own web pages internally simply because there’s a big queue’. Like other FoE publications, in order for new information to go on the website the information must be cleared through a procedure and a set of channels. This involves checks for content, booking time with web managers and then getting it out on-line. This can take time. If it is just updating existing information, however, a member of the campaign team who can write HTML can do it.

²⁷ Participants came from all corners of Australia – Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney and Perth.

²⁸ Nik (desert.indymedia) noted ‘it’s better not to organise a group via email, but better to ... network over email, that’s like a networking of the groups ... you need to ground email. It’s like info sharing, it’s no good having the info sharing unless you print it off and give it to other people. So I think you need to ground the inspiration and ground the information ... it’s a networking device and I think in a lot of ways it’s no substitute’. Also Sam (Melbourne media activist) notes ‘it’s kind of like a tight knit community to so word of mouth is probably a medium’.

²⁹ ‘Open publishing means that the process of creating news is transparent to the readers. They can contribute a story and see it instantly appear in the pool of stories publicly available ... Readers can see editorial decisions being made by others. They can see how to get involved and help make editorial decisions’ (Anon, 2002e).

³⁰ The extent of editorial interference varies between indymedia collectives - all have publicly accessible documents on the ‘Editorial and Decision Making Policies and Processes’. Occasionally extremely racist posts have been removed from the front page, but are still accessible through the newswire pages.

³¹ A text message was also sent to a friend from inside the cordoned off camp was relayed onto the indymedia website and an on-line chat facility was set up.

³² Nik is speaking as a participant of the desert.indymedia collective but not as a representative.

³³ The involvement of detainees in participatory media is set to be further improved through a project of Melbourne indymedia: ‘one of the projects that has come into being since Woomera2002 is a mobile phone project – a project that aims at supplying phones (with media and other numbers pre-programmed in) to detainees ... to let them speak in their own voices for themselves (which is what indymedia is all about)’ (Nik, desert.indymedia).

³⁴ Adam Data (Dorks Advocating Total Anarchy) noted ‘PHP’s got really good politics as a code itself ... It’s open source. It started on Unix based system and it runs on anything now ... it’s all free. It suits indymedia’.

³⁵ ‘the spokescouncil idea is appropriate to a conference, or discussion – not to a group of 1,000 people out in the middle of the desert, surrounded by riot police, trying to work out what the hell to do about an unexpected and difficult situation that seemed to have blown up from nowhere ... this spokescouncil was completely ineffectual’ (Obadiah, 2002).

³⁶ Rosa Deluxembourg is a code name for an activist; she speaks as a Melbourne spacekid but not as a representative of SpaceStation.

³⁷ Activists did not even take on particular roles at Woomera2002 ‘it was pretty much everyone pitch in’ (Nik, desert.indymedia).

³⁸ Getting people to initially have the motivation and confidence to be involved can be difficult. In Melbourne activists have established a media lab, called Space Station, to encourage participation. The aim was not just to provide access to the technology, but make visible the people and processes involved in independent media so that others can see that ‘they’re just like me, I can do that’ (Nik, desert.indymedia).

³⁹ Similar clusters of control develop around other tasks or technology due to skill differentials or access, such as the mobile phone, CB radio, camcorder, or activities such as climbing, tunnel building or media relations. However, few have the potential of ICTs to shape the campaign or protest. The consequences of such nuclei also depend upon whether other participants approve of the way in which the ICTs is being used, or whether they disagree with the way the campaign has been portrayed on, for example, a website.

⁴⁰ Adam Data is a code name for an activist; he speaks as a participant of the Dorks Advocating Total Anarchy collective but not as a representative.

⁴¹ Alex (Melbourne indymedia) commented, ‘I think whatever form of activism you’re involved in, skill sharing is really, really difficult, but there are always, always bottlenecks of information. Like so many groups that I’ve been involved with get to a certain point where one or two people are carrying the whole group on their shoulders, based on their experience and knowledge and confidence and power and history with that particular organisation ... because of the urgency that drives activism people don’t often think that there’s space for new people to do things because we don’t have time for people to make mistakes or learn ... I guess the other thing is that people’s identity is so bound up with their activism that sometimes you don’t necessarily want to skillshare ... I don’t think people like letting go of their identity that much’.

⁴² A process were if consensus does not occur initially, there is further discussion and if there is still no consensus then a 75% vote can pass a proposal (see Anon 2002e for further details).

⁴³ The site had initially only been open publishing but a features section was adopted in September 2001 in an attempt to frame and utilise more of the content.

⁴⁴ This runs counter to some of the indymedia structures being established at a global level. While participation in global decision making is open and accessible few Melbourne indymedia crew found it a comfortable process to be involved in and Australian indymedia activists have started to move towards regionalisation and a critique of the hierarchies of the global infrastructures, 'there's this whole bureaucracy to go through to become part of indymedia which just seems so ridiculously counter' (Alex, Melbourne indymedia).

⁴⁵ The Real Food campaign is co-ordinated from the Leeds regional office and staff use the ISDN line to connect to the intranet and access all the files that staff in London were able to.

⁴⁶ Prior to ICT use activists have still sought to learn from how other movements operated, however ICTs have quicken and cheapen the process of communicating between often distinct identities (Rucht, 1993).

⁴⁷ See <http://noborder.org/peoplesmuggler> for more information.

⁴⁸ For some reason access was denied to the Woomera2002 campaign website through the local ISP used for uploading activist news. However, indymedia sites were still accessible. Furthermore, there are ways to damage the indymedia site because it is open publishing 'it's kind of very trusting software anyway, it's kind of the point' (Adam Data, Dorks Advocating Total Anarchy) but few have attacked the site.

⁴⁹ However, unlike many other significant and radical actions, Woomera2002 was covered internationally by mainstream media (including the BBC in England (see Mercer, 2002) and CNN in America) which facilitated the publicity of the activists concerns. This coverage was probably influenced by the sensitivity of the refugee debate at the time, and the nature and uniqueness of the actions.

⁵⁰ There were limitations even with the PIMP system however, David (posting to Fibreculture email list, 16th April 2002) noted 'problem was for the rest of us that the protesters' camp ... was serviced by exactly one telephone, which was obviously quickly jammed with coins. People I knew with wireless said the mobile coverage was shocking'.

⁵¹ Starr (2000) also argued that participatory democracy worked during the organisation of the anti-WTO Seattle protests, 'groups with different messages, tactics and skills coexisted without attempting centralized organising. That coexistence was the material of the blockade's success. Everyone who participated has now experienced the anarchists alternative to bureaucratic top-down systems. We saw self-organisation at work and it worked' (p.116).

⁵² For an overview of the positive aspects of the actions see Pickerill (2002). There were of course many criticisms of the convergence too – the extremeness of the actions taken, concern for the welfare of the refugees who escaped and the consequences, both legally and emotionally, for the activists who took part.

⁵³ Slevin (2000) suggests that 'organisational activities would soon come to a grinding halt if the views of all those who are part of an organisation would have to be actively canvassed and balanced with respect to every decision made' (p.134).