

## Radical Politics on the Net

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INFORMATION communication technologies (ICTs) have been employed for radical politics since their inception. Radical politics in the context of this article refers to use of ICTs by activists engaged in collective action campaigns often aligned to specific social movements (such as peace, social justice, environmental and anti-capitalist). Such activists believe they are involved in progressive activities, which contribute to a broader reinvigoration of democracy and as such are concerned with social justice and environmental debates. Moreover, radical activists tend to populate the less formal grassroots style of campaigning (as opposed to the more established and largely hierarchical non governmental organisations), occupy the left, rather than the right, wing political landscape and reject the use of violence (which is of particular significance in this era of the ‘war on terror’).

The examples in this article are drawn from a range of empirical projects undertaken by the author into radical politics since the mid-1990s. These have incorporated participant observation into environmental activists’ use of ICTs, exploration of Indymedia collectives and two ongoing research projects into anti-capitalist activities and Internet use by those involved in the anti-war movement in Britain.

We begin by delineating some key moments of experimentation and innovation by radical activists in their use of ICTs. These are moments of temporary novelty, inspirational uses which have then evolved or been discarded. The resonance of these uses is then more closely examined through the identification of five emerging themes. First is the importance of democratic tendencies by radical activists expressed through their online activities by careful consideration of participatory processes and consensus decision-making. These practices enable activists to use ICTs to reinvigorate democratic processes online and off. Second, ICTs have facilitated activists’ ability to employ symbolism and control the representation of their campaigns. Third, there remain threats, in terms of surveillance and adversary reactions, to continued radical use of ICTs. Fourth, ICTs continue to aid the globality of movements through transnationalism and networks of solidarities. Finally, a commonality between these themes is the acceptance and celebration of difference and multiplicity. Consequently, activists’ use of ICTs is articulated around a politics of dissensus.

*The last decade: moments of experimentation and innovation*

Activists have adopted ICTs as additional tools in their organisation and in the execution of a variety of campaigns and actions over the last decade. Their use of the technologies has evolved from a few basic websites to an international network of email lists, contacts and the use of online tactics such as hacktivism. This history is littered with some key moments of inspiration, and understanding this innovation and the changing uses and nature of ICTs enables us to contextualise better the overall importance of the Internet for radical politics. Differentiation between the various types of ICTs is also important. This history becomes both a record of the different groups who have utilised ICTs innovatively and also the evolution of technological changes: from analogue to wireless (and GPS), from large desktops to personal digital assistants (PDAs) and from text-based communication to image-orientated data.

Many environmental and social justice groups began using email and newsgroups in the late 1980s and the web in the early to mid-1990s, often simply as a website advertising a group's existence. Friends of the Earth UK claimed to be the first British environmental group with a web presence and at that time were particularly innovative, developing the Chemical Release Inventory in 1995 which enabled users to enter their postcode and produce a map of polluting factories for their area.<sup>1</sup>

Just a year later the McSpotlight website ([www.mcspotlight.org](http://www.mcspotlight.org)) was launched in support of the McLibel defendants who were being sued by McDonalds for allegedly distributing libellous material. The website not only subverted authority by posting up the original leaflet that was under attack to an international audience, but also used novel features such as hijacking the official company website using frames to give a guided tour of McDonalds online, pointing out inaccuracies and untruths. They were also one of the first activist sites to provide a debating space online which attracted both activists and employees of the company and to provide such comprehensive and expansive information about an ongoing legal trial. By 1998 the website contained over 20,000 pages with several mirror sites around the globe. McSpotlight became a benchmark of inspiration for many other Internet activists.

Another significant example of creativity in Internet activism was far less well known than McSpotlight but provided an important service to many involved in rural non-violent direct action protests in Britain. The Mobile Office was set up by activists after the A30 road protests at Fairmile, Fort Trollheim and Allercombe, in Devon early in 1997 and was used in anti-quarry and tree protection campaigns. It was a transportable office, a collection of equipment which fitted into a van and could be stationed on site at protest camps (eradicating the need to

walk miles to the nearest telephone or town). It offered use of a computer, printer, photocopier, TV and video, telephone, CBs, Internet access and a digital camera.

In the mid-1990s electronic civil disobedience, a form of politicised hacking (now often referred to as hacktivism), began to be advocated by groups such as the Critical Art Ensemble who believed it was necessary to move protest from the streets into cyberspace as ‘nothing of value to the power elite can be found on the streets’.<sup>2</sup> Such statements appear to have even more resonance with the transferral of the June 2001 World Bank meeting from Barcelona into the virtual sphere in response to fears of large scale street protests in the city and the increasing fortification surrounding World Summit meetings such as G8, effectively decreasing the utility of street protests. There was a spate of innovative examples of the use of such tactics, particularly by the British based electrohippies collective who operated client-side distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks on specific companies believed to be harming the environment, one example of which coincided with global actions against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) on 30 November 1999.

It is in the realm of co-ordinating international actions that ICTs have been particularly useful. This potential was illustrated in the mid-1990s by the plight of the Zapatistas and their extensive and innovative use of the Internet and email. Use of ICT added a new transnational dimension to the localised Zapatista struggle and helped them overcome the efforts of the Mexican government to isolate their protest.<sup>3</sup> Details of their situation were rapidly disseminated across email discussion lists, newsgroups and websites to an international audience who responded by supporting the Zapatistas and putting pressure upon the Mexican government.

Drawing inspiration from the Zapatistas’ struggles, global days of action against capitalism began to be organised, with ICT being used as a key method of co-ordination. In Britain, a ‘Carnival Against Capitalism’ was organised on 18 June 1999 (J18) to coincide with the first day of the G8 summit in Germany. Interestingly, unlike global protests since, such as at the G8 demonstrations in Genoa in July 2001 and Scotland in 2005, activists chose to demonstrate in their nearest city rather than travel to the actual location of the target meetings. They used the Internet to make their local opposition more global rather than physically converge on one city. J18 was to be an international day of protest focused upon the banking and financial centres of the world, and demonstrations took place in 75 countries. Prior to the event email was used to exchange ideas and encourage participation. During the day’s actions there was live video streaming of events in London to the website and constant text and images uploaded from events internationally. An Internet Relay Chat (IRC) facility also ran during the afternoon, enabling real-time discussion of the activities in the City of

London between company workers, activists and journalists. Such uses of ICTs for protest were novel at the time, and served as a model which has been replicated and improved upon at other 'global' actions against corporate globalisation or economic institutions such as the WTO or International Monetary Fund (IMF).

During the Seattle demonstrations against the meeting of the WTO in November/December 1999, the Independent Media Centre (IMC or IndyMedia) was formally created. This centre enabled the rapid dissemination of text, images, video and audio about the reasons for the actions and regular updates about the protest situation in the city. Its premise was that media should be a many-to-many process, subverting the traditional media's one-to-many approach. It was thus designed so that anyone could post information directly online without moderation or limitation, a form of open publishing. This facilitated rapid and diverse dissemination of a variety of perspectives on the Seattle protests and was able to avoid censorship. The Indymedia model was subsequently adopted by British activists and many others worldwide. There are now over one hundred and thirty Indymedia websites operating worldwide, most of which are associated with editorial collectives and many having specific spaces from which to operate, such as offices, media labs, info-shops, squats or social centres.<sup>4</sup>

The Internet has increasingly been used as an additional arena in which to 'turn signs into question marks',<sup>5</sup> in other words to employ culture jamming as an online tactic.<sup>6</sup> The traditional forms of subvertising—altering the message of billboard advertisements with paint or other additions—have morphed into sophisticated attempts to subvert political and corporate websites. Whether achieved through a 'jam' (a political satire on a website) or a 'squat' (whereby a similar website URL is used to emulate an official site, e.g. the [www.whitehouse.org](http://www.whitehouse.org) instead of the official [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov) website which seeks to critique the Bush presidency and inject humour into American politics) these can display either blatant or subtle information. Some of these sites appear very similar to the official versions and can subsequently reach wider audiences than clearly identifiable activist websites. An extension of culture jamming is the proliferation of political gaming online. These games are often free to download and designed with explicit political messages.<sup>7</sup> Urban75.com, a London based website, has a particularly large selection of political gimmicks and games. 'Shut up! Tony Blair' involves a small face of Tony Blair zooming around the screen—only by hitting the face with the mouse is he silenced. 'Brick a Brand' is an activist version of the old style Breakout where a brick is used to smash through the wall of brand labelled icons. Other examples include 'Steer Madness' by Veggie Games where the user helps a recently escaped steer to liberate other animals, or the games on the Greenpeace International website such as 'Eco-quest' or 'Whale-flip!' ([www.greenpeace.org/international/fungames](http://www.greenpeace.org/international/fungames)). While these might appear

trivial activities, they could also reach a different audience to standard political propaganda. By overcoming the seriousness of much of activism and instead focusing on the power of fun, such games could have less direct influence upon their users. Urban75 games moreover could potentially draw users into the website where they then might explore further the more serious political content on the rest of the website.

Most recently, radical activists have been making use of the broader emergence of blogs—the evolution from homepage websites to online diaries. A blog (or vlog if it involves uploading video clips rather than text and audio blogging for short audio clips) uses free or low-cost online tools to structure and easily publish and edit postings. This has enabled quick updating of information, comments and discussion to be added by other users to a blogger's site and the easy interlinking between different bloggers' postings. Many of these began in diary format running in reverse chronological order; however, they tend to be reasonably informal and conversation-like rather than longer coherent pieces. Blogs have been used by the larger NGOs (such as Greenpeace) as well as more radical independent activists.<sup>8</sup> For example, The Disillusioned Kid is a UK anti-war blog (<http://disillusionedkid.blogspot.com>).

An extension of the open publishing idea has been the development of Wikis. These allow any (often registered) user to freely edit and alter a website, so that anyone is able to modify pages and add new ones. This facilitates online collaboration, moves towards removing the need for an explicit editorial collective and seeks to break down any hierarchies of access to webpage editorial control. Wikis are being used by many involved in European social forums and by Indymedia collectives.

Finally, the growth of mobile phone ownership is reflected in activists' use for co-ordination, for media interaction such as live press interviews during actions and to aid in spontaneous protest organisation. Although mobile phones have been used less extensively than in other countries (e.g. in the Philippines where text messaging was used to co-ordinate demonstrations which led to the end of Estrada's rule as President), they were used during anti-war protests. During a visit by President Bush in February 2003, activists used mobile phones to send location reports and images of attempts to disrupt the PR of his visit to the Chasing Bush website.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, they were used during trade justice actions in 2002 where 'a text gave me instructions about when to do the Mexican Wave, a fun way of coordinating thousands of protesters encircling the Houses of Parliament'.<sup>10</sup> However, despite the hype there has been relatively little evidence in the UK of the use of mobiles for flash mobbing—the spontaneous organisation of street protest orchestrated through texts to temporarily 'liberate' urban spaces.<sup>11</sup>

So, the story of radical politics on the net is one of technological evolution, tactical evolution and key moments of experimentation and innovation. Use has evolved from the development of information databases, subverting the political control of information, live feeds from

street protests, hacktivism, culture jamming, to blogs, wikis and mobile phone mobilisations. From this brief summary it is clear that there is a long and colourful history of radical activists using ICTs to add leverage to their real world concerns and that use of ICTs has become a crucial and beneficial component of many activist campaigns. As Kahn and Kellner suggest, 'the global Internet, then, is creating the base and the basis for an unparalleled worldwide anti-war/pro-peace and social justice movement during a time of terrorism, war, and intense political struggle'.<sup>12</sup>

### *Emerging themes*

Having mapped a number of tactics employed by radical activists in their use of the Internet, we need to understand what these moments of innovation mean in the broader political context. Yet these moments are often short lived, temporary by their very nature of subversion and expectation of an adversary reaction. The resonance of these tactical interventions will enable us to gauge the importance of the Internet to radical activists and, perhaps more significantly, the leverage gained by activists in their use of the Internet. There are five emerging themes from this analysis of radical Internet activism.

DEMOCRATIC TENDENCIES. The potential of the Internet to provide an additional space for the renewal of democratic politics has long been debated.<sup>13</sup> This has included discussion as diverse as the merits of e-voting, to the political consequences of chat-room interactions. Radical activists also have an investment in the democratic potential of the Internet, expressed through a variety of their practices.

Primarily, there is an emphasis on the quest for a direct democracy, i.e. a system of governance that requires participation of all subjects in decisions and a critique of the more common elective democracy. The mobilisation and inclusion of new participants and the structures through which participation is encouraged and maintained thus reflect activists' attempts to broaden the democratic potential of the Internet. However, the extent to which activists have been successful in broadening political debate is reliant upon their specific practices. In other words, while there may be a rhetoric of participation underlying many of their actions, it is important to examine how this is actually reflected online.

Predictably, one of the key functions of activists' presence online has been to mobilise others to take part in or support particular campaigns and actions. This mobilisation is often an extension of other off-line efforts to garner support through, for example, flyers, media coverage or telephone trees. Online it has taken the form of email requests, web-pages providing details of the campaign or action or, more creatively, the development of virtual actions (such as email petitions or electronic civil disobedience) as a way in which to trigger interest and hopefully eventually more involvement.

In these ways, mobilisation online tends to be primarily concerned with triggering in-person active support for campaigns, in other words for promoting off-line action. Research thus far has concluded that it has been rare that online information alone has triggered the participation of those who had no other links into activism. However, it has facilitated the interconnection and communication between campaigns (and thus the participation of activists involved in other projects) and encouraged those involved in more peripheral ways to increase their activism (thus, for example, moving from reading emails online to attending a street protest).

However, it is also important to take a broader understanding of participation when assessing the democratic successes of radical activism online. If we move beyond the narrow definition of mobilisation (and thus measures of numbers of participants) to understanding participation as part of a looser cultural process of engagement, then activists' online actions take on broader resonance. Although it is simultaneously harder to judge the outcomes using this broader perspective, it enables us to recognise the multiplicity of the inventive strategies employed. For example, the use of humour to reach different audiences could be as important as the seriousness of open publishing projects in triggering a political consciousness. In these ways, such creative tactics, while perhaps short lived or small scale, are all part of the rhizomic, nomadic and interconnected space of political activism online. Moreover, blogging can be viewed as a valid contribution to democratic dialogue, 'bloggers are expanding the notion altogether of what the Internet is and how it can be used'.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, we can understand these as powerful interjections into conventional understandings of online democracy and as exemplars encouraging the creation of a broader deliberative democracy. We may not be able to measure their exact outcome, but this is not to say that they do not contribute towards a reinvigoration of democratic principles.

Extending the understanding of what democracy means a step further, we can explore the ways in which activists organise online, or use ICTs in their organisation, as an additional reflection of their democratic tendencies. Of particular interest here are the flows and character of information within the organisation (which may cover huge geographical distances). Email lists and the use of ICTs to facilitate regular communication has improved the ability of activists to co-ordinate internally. Crucially, with respect to democratic principles, it has strengthened the ability of networks to retain non-hierarchical forms of organising, thus contradicting Michels' iron law of oligarchy which argues that centralisation and its associated bureaucratisation is an inevitable eventual consequence of any organisational grouping.<sup>15</sup> Activists have increasingly begun to consider 'the hierarchies of knowledge we are party to, and to think of ways we can share knowledge and skills'.<sup>16</sup> If groups are able to retain less hierarchical structures for

longer, then decision-making will remain more participatory, with activists thus practising ways which are more reflective of how they wish society operated.

Yet predictably, this increased information flow, and the ease with which it can be shared has also created problems for activist networks. Historically, scale has been a limiting factor even for those networks consciously attempting to break the iron law of oligarchy. The bigger an organisation has become, the harder it has found it to retain decentralised practices. This has also been true of online activist networks. Bennett has suggested that ICTs make social movements hard to control: that this increased information flow complicates decision-making and reduces the networks' ability to retain a collective identity.<sup>17</sup> For example, with increased postings the Indymedia open publishing model began to be swamped, often with spam, racist or repetitive postings. In response, collectives began to set editorial guidelines and 'hide' some postings, effectively enforcing a centralised (albeit collectively run) decision-making structure upon the once looser and non-hierarchical network. Moreover, these increased postings and thus increased number of participants have served to dilute and challenge the possibility of Indymedia having a unified and neat 'identity'. In other words, increased participation has confused and complicated the aims of Indymedia.

One of the responses to this has been an attempt to practise consensus decision-making online. Consensus has been adopted by many involved in anti-capitalist movements as a way to practise direct participatory democracy. The consensus method takes many forms but revolves around including as many participants as possible, valuing all contributors and contributions equally, rotating facilitation (as opposed to long-term leadership) and, crucially, seeking consensus for any decision or proposal.<sup>18</sup> The aim, therefore, is to end up with a proposal that everyone is agreed upon, rather than allowing the majority to make the decision, as in representative democracy. In this way, dissenting voices are not marginalised, but instead their points considered by all present until a new proposal is accepted by all, or the dissenters stand aside. When there are larger numbers of people involved, spokescouncils are used: a representative from each group attends a meeting as a 'spoke' but only contributes to the decision-making via frequent consultation with their group, thus seeking consensus on any decisions made.

Online consensus is harder to attain. Consensus as practised face to face includes the use of informal affirmation, e.g. the use of hand gestures and of 'mood watchers' to observe that the process is not excluding potential contributors. This ability to judge non-verbally what support or dissension there is for particular discussion points aids the decision-making process. Online these clues are harder to gauge and communicate. Yet consensus is valued for the challenge it poses to representative democratic structures where the disempowered are

marginalised and excluded. Consequently, networks such as Indymedia have sought to practise consensus online, modifying it to account for the lack of visual clues. In its most basic form, it involves someone posting their proposal to the email list and setting a timeline for objections. If there are no objections the proposal is accepted; if there are objections a broader discussion takes place. If the proposal was particularly contentious, the discussion might have to be moved off-line to a face-to-face meeting, or a form of modified consensus practised whereby the proposal could be resolved by a vote. Such modifications of consensus have been necessary because it has proved harder to delimit the debate around particular proposals, resulting in extended discussion without resolution.

Returning to the Indymedia example, the lack of collective identity is also reflected in the concept of networked individualism. Castells has suggested that there is a rising prominence of individualism in society, that the individual has become more important than the collective. When this is combined with ICTs the result is a networked individualism where 'individuals build their networks, online and off-line, on the basis of their interests, values, affinities, and projects'<sup>19</sup> rather than local place-based affinity. Such plurality in the choices of whom we connect with and the ability to connect regardless of geographical location could potentially aid activists' global interconnections. At the same time, however, there is a danger that within such a network society and post-modern culture, individuals would identify with multiple groups and have a weakened commitment to any one community, forever able to move on and find new 'others' to connect with. In such an environment, it is potentially difficult to generate the trust necessary for individuals to co-ordinate collective action.

These issues, of networked individualism, scale as a limiting factor to participatory structures, and the difficulty of building trust between disparate participants online have been tackled creatively by radical activists. Their response has not been to see these issues as online problems per se, but rather as broader considerations of organisation, online and off-line. In short, activists have developed novel forms of organisation and then translated these into online arenas, such as the use of consensus. If activists are successful in raising the profile of their campaigns and the number of participants involved then they have successfully used the Internet as a tool through which to reinvigorate public political debate. However, it is also important when assessing the democratic tendencies of radical activism on the Internet to acknowledge that activists' attempts are often partial, fractured and never all inclusive, but specifically tailored to attract participation of those deemed to strengthen campaigns, rather than society as a whole.

REPRESENTATION AND IMAGE CONSTRUCTION. An addition to these democratic tendencies has been the focus on the heightened importance of representation in this media-orientated world. Castells has argued

that 'it is in the realm of symbolic politics, and in the development of issue-oriented mobilisations by groups and individuals outside the mainstream political system that new electronic communication may have the most dramatic effects'.<sup>20</sup> Given the importance today of the mediation of politics, one can regard these movements as dedicated to 'symbolic crusades'<sup>21</sup> which aim to convince the public (and their supporters) of the legitimacy of their goals by argument at a distance. Symbolic clashes are evident elsewhere, for example, to counter statements from accredited military spokespeople during war actions.

Thus ICTs play a key role in this symbolism and in the construction of the campaign image to be communicated.<sup>22</sup> This attempt to use ICTs to shape the ways in which audiences will receive, and thus perceive, the activists' information is a form of frame alignment. Master frames are developed and used in communications to set the agenda within the movement and to the intended audience. Activists carefully consider what information and visual representations they will use to best convince others of the validity of their approach. For example, in a campaign concerned with laboratories undertaking testing on animals, activists may choose to focus primarily on the vulnerability and likeability of the animals while depicting the brutality of the experiments they are subjected to. Hence, they will seek to frame the debate on their terms and exclude information or complexities which might hinder their arguments. Moreover, activists will seek to frame alignment with their intended audience, shifting the representation of their campaign to fit into existing debates or to reach those they are aiming to mobilise.

ICTs might be considered a means of frame extension,<sup>23</sup> but they may also contribute to frame clouding. This occurs when the potential message of a group becomes diluted or contested. Online representations could lead to a loss of thematic focus for a group if they become associated with others through loose alliances, or unmoderated discussion lists raise controversial issues. The use of ICTs can pose a risk for some campaigns in terms of representation. Websites can be professionally produced and content controlled; however, information can also be uploaded online immediately and posted to an international audience. Unlike print forms of communication, ICTs are faster and cheaper to produce, more material can be created and a campaign's image can become distorted.

The use of ICTs has facilitated activists' ability to employ symbolism, to present their campaigns to a broader audience and use the technology as a form of frame extension. However, ICTs have also facilitated a heightened information flow, which could serve to complicate their campaign's key messages. Moreover, activists use of ICTs contributes to the broader processes of the mediation of politics.

SUBVERSION, SURVEILLANCE AND CONTROL. This ability to use ICTs as additional tools of representation and image construction—as an

arena in which to control their portrayal—has not escaped the attention of their adversaries. Early analysis of Internet use suggested that radical activists were able to use the technology subversively to avoid police surveillance and control. This was particularly deemed to be the case with the planning of the J18 demonstrations in 1999 in London, where headlines from newspapers included ‘A riot from Cyberspace’, ‘Internet Message Sets Off A Rampage’ and ‘Virtual Chaos Baffles Police’. Activists sought to utilise this freedom from surveillance to their advantage, capitalising on the apparent spontaneity it enabled in organising street protest or the anonymity of undertaking virtual actions.

Predictably, of course, legislation has gradually been introduced which has significantly increased the ability of the Home Office to monitor Internet use, such as the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (2000) and the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act (2001). In addition is the acknowledgement by activists that the more successful they might become in communicating their message, the more significant the surveillance, regulation and retaliation they would face. This retaliation would also come from non-state actors often in the form of counter-strategies: monitoring online discussion groups, public relations campaigns to mitigate activists’ rhetoric or attempting to get certain online information, such as websites, removed.

Thus the cycle of subversion, adversary response and tactical evolution continues. Activists are increasingly acknowledging that they need to be able to protect their online activities (e.g. through encryption), protect their data and develop new tactics which will take their adversaries by surprise. At the same time, there remains a tension between the ways in which groups seek to mitigate the implications of the legislation without themselves closing avenues for new participants and collaborations with other networks. Groups have responded to such threats in different ways.<sup>24</sup> For example, in October 2004, the servers of Indymedia in London were seized, shutting down 20 related Indymedia websites. The impact of the seizure was short lived, however, for most of the data had been mirrored by other servers and sites were simply re-routed, but some data was permanently lost. Most alarmingly, it appeared that it was US authorities who had seized the servers, but there was little information about why and who specifically had requested the seizure.

This cycle of innovation and state response, albeit tempered by activists’ desire to remain open and participatory, reflects broader tensions within contemporary society: that of the capacity of civil society to support political participation and democratic practices while simultaneously dealing with security threats. Activists’ experiences are both an attempt to assert the importance of a vibrant political debate and a reassertion of the power of the state and certain non-state actors to suppress dissenting views. ICTs provided a temporary space of freedom for radical politics that is increasingly threatened. While the power of their adversaries remains partial and incomplete, activists are wary of entering

a technical arms race to ensure their privacy and there are clear threats to future radical uses of ICTs.

TRANSNATIONALISM AND NETWORKS OF SOLIDARITY. Transnational networks of activists have of course existed for decades.<sup>25</sup> However, ICTs have facilitated the continued internationalisation of movements. Rather than generating international organisational frameworks (achieved by non-governmental organisations such as Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace), radical activists have created transnational linkages of solidarity between local struggles.<sup>26</sup> This is a form of decentralised transnationalism. It is the ability to make connections between disparate causes and campaigns. These campaigns do not need to share explicit aims but rather agree upon an underlying commonality of perspective. For example, peace activists in Britain will likely support other peace campaigns internationally, bound by a unified pacifist ideology, even if they do not necessarily support the tactics or approach taken by the other group. In practice, this solidarity is expressed through symbolic actions, the sharing of resources and skills or actually visiting and joining in different struggles.

The emphasis in this form of transnationalism is on the importance of local struggles. However, it is the connections between these local actions and their importance in building a recognition of the global nature of the issues faced by society which become paramount here. Thus solidarity across struggles strengthens the claims made by those engaged at the local level and vice versa, that global claims of the importance of certain issues are strengthened by evidence of multiple local struggles.<sup>27</sup>

The importance of ICTs in building these global networks is obvious and exemplified repeatedly. At its most basic, it has involved the use of email and websites to share stories of struggle or to co-ordinate international days of action. In February 2003, millions of people took to the streets worldwide to voice their opposition to the impending war with Iraq, with an estimated two million people gathering in Hyde Park, London.<sup>28</sup> Such synchronisation of actions is no longer viewed as particularly innovative nor novel, yet this ability to organise such demonstrations relatively cheaply and quickly should not be undervalued. Moreover, given the increased threats of surveillance, the ability of local struggles to receive symbolic support through online interaction could be vital to the morale and maintenance of local and potentially isolated struggles. In the US, there has been 'stepped-up monitoring of domestic political activity by FBI counter-terror agents'<sup>29</sup> facilitated by the relaxation of FBI guidelines in 2002 which has resulted in increased intimidation of radical activists. More complex use of ICTs has involved the sharing of specific tactics between struggles internationally or the co-ordination of tactical use such as hacktivism.

THE POLITICS OF DISSENSUS. It has become common to think not of a single movement, but of a 'movement of movements'<sup>30</sup> which represents 'one no' against, for example, global neoliberalism, and also 'many yeses'.<sup>31</sup> The example of Indymedia, and the dilution of its aims and identity by increasing numbers of participants, illustrates just one of the dilemmas for radical activists. Historically, other movements have responded by adopting more authoritarian models of operation, clearly defining what are valid aims and actions of their participants, resulting in a centralised and, by default, limiting power structure. In contrast, radical activists involved in networks such as Indymedia, and more broadly anti-capitalist or anti-war movements, have sought alternative responses. They have acknowledged that their strength lies in the diversity of the participants. Hence, to draw boundaries around what is deemed valid in terms of aims, tactics and ideology would reduce that power, reduce the number of participants and eventually curtail the vibrancy of the movements. Thus rather than view difference as a divisive threat they have sought to celebrate it as a form of strength.

This is of course easier said than done. It begins with an acceptance of multiplicity, that we do not have one fixed identity, in other words that we can be many things simultaneously. Participants in campaigns are able to be more than simply activists, they are also students, parents, carers, workers, gendered, gay, straight, the list goes on. This approach also accepts that affiliations are fluid, evolving and overlapping and that there will always be a natural turnover in groups and participation. Importantly, this does not signal the death of a campaign but conversely is a reflection of the vibrancy of those involved, the continued cycle of creation and reinvention.

In practice, this acceptance of multiplicity and difference is reflected in the openness of activist networks. Indymedia based its premise on openness, not just open publishing, but an openness in who could be a participant (often running in open, public and free Internet labs), in who could join in the collectives and in who could set up new Indymedia websites. This is not to say there is a lack of structure to the network, but that most collectives try and ensure that this structure is transparent, non-hierarchical and entry points are obvious. Consequently, the risks posed by a networked individualism are diminished. It is accepted that an individual can have many affiliations, many moments of commitment, but that this does not necessarily diminish their commitment to activism or the agency they may bring with them to an action. In fact, it is increasingly demanded that symbolic mobilisers must have a multitude of experience in order to have the requisite characteristics of communication skills, educational attainment and knowledge of media in order to be successful. Moreover, this emphasis on openness reasserts that having a discreet and agreed set of aims is less important than facilitating diverse participation in activism. As Gilbert argues, this facilitation of broad participation will necessarily change

the focus of the movements and challenge existing understandings of what it is to be an activist. It involves accepting new ideas, new people, new debates:

We are everywhere? We're not, you know – but we could be. And if we're going to be, then we have to acknowledge what a scary thought that really is: for once 'we' are everywhere then there will be nothing to define ourselves against, and so 'we' will be nowhere. If we really want to make the world a better place than that's what we have to want. But learning to want it will take courage, the courage to accept the risk to our identities which real change always poses.<sup>32</sup>

The importance of celebrating rather than seeking to eradicate difference is also reflected in activists' response to the issue of scale—that the larger the scale the more problematic it is to remain non-hierarchical. The response has been the growth of support for autonomy and autonomous practices. Autonomy is taken to refer to the quest for self-determination—the ability to participate in all decisions which affect you. This interpretation views autonomy as a power relation and 'not a discrete commodity that is possessed or not possessed, by individuals or localities'.<sup>33</sup> In practice, it enables smaller scale organisation and local control over decision-making while retaining links and commonality with other groups involved in broader movements (as illustrated by transnationalism and associated networks of solidarity). This approach is supportive of difference, accepting that priorities will be different amongst alternative groups of people, but that they may still share a commonality in underlying aims or approaches. Online it is reflected in the proliferation of groups, networks and websites, which all have a slightly different focus but simultaneously fall under the broad umbrella of being part of the anti-war movements. This autonomy is also reflected in the variety of tactics employed online and that this multiplicity, this ability to swarm adversaries, does not require agreement from all parties involved but is a strength of the diversity of radical activism.

This celebration of difference reflects Mouffe's assertions that the quest for consensus politics undermines democracy and will ultimately limit society's capacity to deal with extremism.<sup>34</sup> She highlights instead the importance of disagreement and argues for a politics of dissensus. This 'agonistic pluralism'<sup>35</sup> is seen as being vital to the operation of an effective democracy and thus the impossibility of an all-inclusive political consensus. The existence of radical activism is a perfect illustration of such antagonism in contemporary politics. However, the question remains as to when this dissensus becomes more problematic than helpful.

There are two instances within the movements explored here that illustrate this dilemma: the use of consensus decision-making processes and the threat of normalisation. First, radical activists, particularly those within anti-capitalist movements, have increasingly adopted the

use of consensus decision-making structures. When large numbers of participants or a broad variety of groups use such methods (such as through the use of spokescouncils or online), consensus is still sought but can be increasingly problematic to achieve. This emphasis on consensus can work against the celebration of difference, for it asks not just to find commonality between participants but agreement. The anarchist use of affinity groups, whereby decisions are only made at group level and rarely externally, enables the incorporation of difference more easily. This issue becomes particularly acute online because it enables more participants to contribute than might in a weekly face-to-face meeting.

Second, for activists who rely upon novelty to gain attention from the media, government, adversaries and the public, through, for example, holding the 'biggest' street rally, employing inventive tactics, using ICTs in novel ways, there will always be the threat of normalisation. It has been the uniqueness of the ways in which such technology has been employed that has garnered activists such attention. This approach, however, locks activists into a cycle of constantly having to be creative and as usage of ICTs has dramatically increased so too has the competition for attention. Activists no longer gain media attention for creating a database of polluting factories online. Much of their use of ICTs is rapidly understood to be rather mundane in comparison with other usage. Viewing diversity as strength in this context could facilitate the prevention of this normalisation, and by incorporating a broader range of tactics and experiences activists would be better placed to continue the cycle of innovation. However, diversity could hinder the ability of campaigns to stand out from the crowd and to be heard amongst the noise of other voices and activism.

### *Conclusions—where to now?*

Previously, I have argued that ICTs 'use has opened up opportunities, a temporary space of resistance, which has enabled . . . movements to move in a new direction typified by global grassroots solidarities, multi-issue campaigns and anti-hierarchical forms of organising'.<sup>36</sup> From this brief foray into the last decade of radical politics on the Internet, a number of similar themes have emerged. This article has drawn upon a particular subset of radical politics, those involved in social justice, environmental, peace and anti-capitalist campaigns. The emerging themes of significance from such activists' use of ICTs reflect their core values, beliefs and practices. However, the tensions which they have faced hold a broader resonance for politics online. The complications of communicating across difference and multiplicity in a world of symbolic clashes, increased mediation of politics and surveillance and suppression will have significance for many other ICT users. Radical activists' uses of ICTs have illustrated both its importance to several movements' core activities and the importance of radical activists' innovations to the ways in which ICTs are viewed and used by others.

We began with a focus upon the moments of innovation—the moments of creativity and transgression that have triggered media and public imaginations—yet the mundane remains important here. It is in the everyday uses that democratic tendencies are practised, surveillance subverted and global solidarities maintained. Apparently mundane uses of ICTs are the backbone of these movements just as our everyday routines serve to construct our lives. It is in these repetitive practices that ICT use becomes accepted, solidified and invaluable. In this way, there remains a need for further detailed research into the utilisation of specific technologies constituting ICTs (such as mobile phones) as much as the more unique aspects of ICT use (e.g. wireless blogging from protest sites or the free-riding on insecure neighbourhood Wi-Fi networks).<sup>37</sup> Finally, the possibilities of a politics of dissensus require further examination. The ways in which difference between and within movements have been celebrated using ICTs are laudable but significant questions remain as to the future of such an approach. The possibilities for the next decade of radical activism on the net are both inspiring and full of challenges.

### *Acknowledgements*

Part of this research was undertaken through funding provided by The Leverhulme Trust (2001–2003) and for an ongoing Economic and Social Research Council project RES-228-25-0060 on *Internet Activism: Anti-War Movements in the Information Age* (with Frank Webster at City University). I would particularly like to thank Frank Webster and Angus Cameron for insightful discussion on this topic. This work would not have been possible without the invaluable help of all the interviewees who have participated in my various research projects over the last 10 years.

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