Environmental activists have been widely recognized for their innovative use of the media, often deploying it to raise public awareness and pressure politicians. Over the last few years they have extended this media savvy to the Internet, which they have used to publicize their campaigns, mobilize participation, coordinate actions, and as a tactical tool in itself. To illustrate these developments, we can explore the connection between the Internet and environmental activism movements in Britain.

The research described herein involved 80 in-depth interviews completed between June 1997 and June 1999 with members of Friends of the Earth, the Center for Alternative Technology, the Green Student Network, McSpotlight, SchNEWS, the Lyninge Forest campaign, and the Mobile Office. Five main research areas were examined: environmental activist attitudes towards the potentially environmentally damaging technology of computers; the problems of Internet access for activists; the risks of Internet surveillance of environmentalist activities; the Internet’s role in environmental mobilization; and the development of on-line tactics.

The Internet’s use by environmentalists can seem paradoxical since it requires advanced technology whose production and usage has extensive environmental and social consequences. As a result, tensions arise within the environmental movement between activists who advocate different approaches to technology.

None of the activists I interviewed were anti-technology per se; but most did view it as causing some environmental destruction. Many interviewees rationalized their Internet use, arguing that on balance the benefits they received outweighed the environmental damage caused. Some also worked to reduce the environmental effects of computers. They did so by reusing and recycling components, by reducing the energy used by their computers, and by using renewable energy sources rather than electricity from the national grid. Environmentalists thereby found a compromise to handle the dilemma of needing anti-environmental machines to develop their environmental agenda.

Environmental activists also face problems in gaining access to the Internet. The ways activists organize their access to the Net both reflects and contradicts their broader organizational principles. For example, British environmental groups promote participatory (or direct) democracy. We might expect to see this...
attitude of inclusion reflected in environmentalists’ use of the Internet, and in some ways it was but in others it was not.

The activists I interviewed faced various access problems, caused by insufficient financial resources, differing skill levels, hardware and software problems, and time limitations. Gender and ethnicity also indicated differential access to the Internet. Women and non-white environmentalists were significantly under-represented among those using the Net. Language was also a constraining factor. In Net communication the emphasis is on the written word and English is the common language, which can be exclusionary for some. All these factors produced an uneven utilization of the technology by interviewees.

The environmental activists tried to overcome these access problems through various initiatives. Costs were mitigated by fundraising and donations. Many also reduced their outlay by using old and existing equipment, using free Internet Service Providers, using volunteers to construct their website, and limiting the time they spent on-line. They also emphasized skill sharing within groups, through formal training sessions and informal exchanges. But hardware and software problems, inadequate multiculturalism or female participation, and non-English speakers were simply not dealt with in many cases, reflecting the groups’ limited inclusiveness.

The access problem also extends to the audience for environmental communications. The activists interviewed tried to use the Internet in ways that did not unnecessarily exclude members of the intended audience. They did this by simplifying their on-line presence (refraining from using complex graphics or plug-ins), by using other distribution methods, or by providing access facilities. In all cases the groups used a range of methods to distribute their message (such as word of mouth, flyers and publications), preventing a reliance upon the Internet. Finally, two groups—the Mobile Office and the Center for Alternative Technology—actually provided the computers through which people could access the Internet.

The non-hierarchical and fluid structure of many environmental groups promoted an innovative use of the Internet. Their organizational structure encouraged individual autonomy, expression, and experimentation and thus Internet enthusiasts could respond quickly to its opportunities. In cases where a high percentage of participants could secure Internet access, its use also eased internal communication problems and speeded up internal flows. Moreover, by using the Internet, groups could resist the pressure to formalize and develop hierarchies. The Internet also reduced the traditional need to centralize, instead providing cheap, fast, decentralized communication between participants. In these ways the Internet has made grassroots direct action networks a more permanent (and thus less transient) feature of the environmental movement.

Law enforcement agencies (and, in some cases, public relations firms and corporations) have monitored environmentalist activities for many years. This surveillance includes environmentalist use of the Internet and has taken many forms: monitoring the content of e-mails and websites, observing who talks to whom, seizing computers and hard drives, and the inter-linking of databases.
nationally or internationally to provide personal profiles of key activists. Corporatization also threatens the environmentalists’ use of the Internet. As companies stake their claim to cyberspace, they can influence its regulation and the practices of service providers.

Most commonly, my interviewees overcame on-line surveillance by restricting what they posted on the Internet. Some interviewees have also sought to protect what was already on-line by enhancing their computer security, using encryption and foreign hosts. They also sought control over their own servers and established mirror sites. Some interviewees used the Internet to resist commercial commodification by creating an arena for publicizing anti-corporate information. They also resisted new Internet legislation, and even encouraged others to break existing laws or to avoid using specific software.

For environmentalists, the on-line surveillance and counter strategies they have encountered have questioned whether their use of Internet technology may only be temporary. Rather than abandoning the Internet, however, many have tried to avoid surveillance or actively resist legislation. Thus environmentalists are part of a larger constituency who are keen to protect cyberspace as a public space, free from state and corporate dominance.

Mobilizing participation is a crucial function for many environmental groups. They aim to move to action those already within the movement or to motivate the general public to become involved. The Internet has been used by several of the groups I examined to mobilize participation, not only in addition to existing methods, but also in order to overcome the limits of those traditional methods—such as enabling a wider audience to be reached at a lower cost.

Five key processes of mobilization emerged in my interviews: using the Internet as a gateway to activism; using it to raise the profile of group campaigns; stimulating local activism; mobilizing on-line activism; and attracting participants to existing protests. The basis for these processes was the provision of information to potential participants.

In addition to mobilization, the Internet has been used to promote networking and to boost solidarity amongst activists. Using the Internet as a networking tool, interviewees were able to mobilize international participation in their campaigns, share solutions and ideas and draw strength from each other’s support. The connections made through the Internet gave the comfort of solidarity to activists (especially those involved in isolated or small-scale campaigns). Furthermore, it promoted communication between physically or ideologically distant entities.

Maintaining other links outside the movement, evidenced by some interviewees, also enabled the cross-fertilization of alternative ideas and the sharing of skills across movement groups. These processes of learning from other movements and groups have always existed and do not rely on using the Internet, but the technology has reduced the cost and increased the speed of these interactions—contributing to a potential increase in exchanges.

Despite these examples, though, it remains difficult to discern the Net’s exact significance in mobilizing individuals into particular protests and campaigns. The Net provides only one of multiple methods used to attract participants and, in
fact, most of those interviewed in this project had either become involved without the Internet, or the Internet had (by their admission) played only a peripheral role in their engagement. Thus, the use of the Internet may not particularly increase the ability to mobilize participation in protest events within existing environmental groups or like-minded cliques since adequate networks may already exist there. Rather, the Internet serves to strengthen these existing networks and enable quick and cheap communication within them.

The Internet can be used for more than distributing information. It can be a tool to lobby adversaries, or to undertake “hacktivism” (the combination of hacking with politically inspired activism), but from the interviewees’ testimonies the use of on-line tactics by environmentalists seems to be limited. Interviewees valued their presence in cyberspace as a symbolic act of protest in itself, and there were ample examples of using the Internet for lobbying, but the creation of unofficial websites and web-based live broadcasts was more limited, and the practice of hacktivism was confined to scattered examples of electronic civil disobedience.

Many groups had rejected the use of on-line tactics because they were concerned about breaching “netiquette,” or because they thought such tactics were ineffectual when they had more pressing priorities, using tried and tested methods of protest. The greatest potential remained in the combination of on-line tactics with existing techniques of protest; my interviewees preferred that any on-line tactics be correlated with off-line protests or rooted in off-line experience.

Overall, environmentalist use of the Internet as a tactic provides an additional appendage rather than a fundamental shift in their repertoire of actions. In general, interviewees have simply transferred their existing methods onto the Internet and not challenged their approaches to protest.

The Internet's use by alternative media has provided environmentalists with an important tool. These media allow environmental groups to direct how their causes and actions will be represented and to distribute their information quickly to an international audience. Digital production has reduced the burdens of production—in terms of the finance, skill and time required—allowing fewer individuals to produce a publication. The use of the Internet has also enabled new publication formats, making alternative media potentially more open to a new audience.

No rules now exist as to what constitutes a publication, and there are fewer boundaries to readership. To some extent this has diminished the distinctiveness of environmentalists' alternative media on-line, and thus it has implications for the movement’s ability to motivate a specific readership into action. Despite these advances in alternative media, the importance of mainstream media remains since environmentalists believe that the public and politicians still use it primarily to inform their opinions.

In sum, environmental activists in Britain have had to resolve the tensions of using environmentally damaging technology. They have had to be cautious of on-line surveillance and overcome access problems, but they have also grasped
the opportunities provided by Internet technology to support participant mobilization and coordination.

They have used the Net effectively for distributing their alternative media and they have developed new on-line tactics of protest, effectively mutating the technology from within. The ways environmental activists have overcome the barriers and utilized these opportunities illustrates the complex manner in which cyberspace can be used as a site (and form) of resistance.

We can identify six important aspects of Internet use for environmental politics as a result of this research. First, environmentalists are modifying, not rejecting, the use of modern technology. The ways in which interviewees dealt with the paradox of using computers to advance their cause illustrates the pragmatic approach many environmentalists have taken towards technology. This is a strength and not a weakness in their approach towards the environment. By being pragmatic they can engage the public and campaign for change rather than segregate themselves into isolated communities. Environmentalists’ use of modern technology also helps to challenge the stereotype of the anti-technology, anti-progress protester, making them more appealing to the public.

Second, environmentalists in Britain were able to extend their control using the Internet. Interviewees claimed the Internet provided an additional (and extensive) channel through which they could proliferate their message(s). They have had such control over traditional avenues of alternative media before, but the Internet is cheaper, quicker and enables distribution to an international audience. Furthermore, the Internet has reinforced some environmentalists’ aims of organizing using non-hierarchical structures, reducing the pressure towards professionalization that many groups have faced. Moreover, grassroots groups were able to maintain more control over their operations and not rely upon larger organizations for resources, or on mainstream media for coverage.

Third, environmentalists in this research were able to resist containment by their opponents by using the Internet. In other words, environmental activists have been able to reduce the slope of the playing field using Net technology. Not only did the Internet give interviewees ready access to a national and international audience, but also traditional attempts at surveillance have been (to some extent) subverted. Moreover, by maintaining their non-hierarchical forms of organizing, environmental groups could sustain a nomadic form of power and a center-less organization that centralized state authorities and hierarchical multinational organizations have a hard time targeting. This is especially poignant because traditionally the state and multinationals had been able to wield power over some of the larger environmental organizations by threatening to seize or freeze their assets. In contrast, it is a lot harder to locate key individuals or seize the assets of non-hierarchical networks.

Fourth, Net use is increasing the movement’s cohesion. The Internet has mobilized participation for virtual actions and strengthened the existing movement networks for physical action. Activists have found it possible to mobilize those who are already within the movement networks using the Internet without face-to-face contact. The Internet is simply a quicker, cheaper and more global method of utilizing these pre-existing networks, though at present the Internet
acts mostly to strengthen existing networks. While the Internet has the potential to provide a new method of recruitment, most mobilization relies upon integration into existing networks. In these ways, the technology has been used to expedite the interlinking of the British environmental movement.

Fifth, the Net has the potential to allow environmentalists to better “swarm” opponents. Each group interviewed utilized the Internet to some extent to extend their repertoire of tactics into new territories. Despite its potential, however, the Internet has not yet been used to constitute radically new forms of protest. This may result because hacktivism is illegal and secretive, and because companies are reluctant to highlight any attacks, but these acts also require considerable technical ingenuity that may not yet be prevalent in the British environmental movement.

Finally, the Net allows groups to act more quickly. The Internet’s speed has enabled interviewees to communicate more quickly, more often and across the barrier of distance. The increased velocity by which activists were able to communicate contributed to the changes outlined above. As interaction speeded up, the process of mobilization also escalated, enabling some actions to become more spontaneous, and consequently less confinable by the authorities.

British environmental activists are a diverse cohort composed of individuals and groups with divergent aims, ideologies and forms of organization, and these differences are exposed in their contrasting attitudes and uses for the Internet. They are united, however, in their struggle to use the Internet to their advantage and to continue their protest, activism, and resistance (and creation of positive alternatives) through, and in, cyberspace. Clearly, cyberspace and the Internet provide a site of political and cultural struggle for environmentalists, and using the Net affects the organizational forms and processes of these groups.

The new interactions triggered by Internet use have significantly altered each of the environmental groups considered in this research, and they are likely to produce new collaborations and forms of environmental protest, particularly internationally. Small, grassroots groups that often suffer from a lack of resources have benefited especially from using the Internet. Although problems and restrictions remain, environmentalists in the U.K. are nevertheless weaving a green web.

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