

Chapter Twelve

Media and communication strategies of glocalized activists: beyond media-centric thinking

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Introduction

The Internet has provided activists new opportunities to build networks (across borders) and exchange alternative information or distribute counter-hegemonic discourses in a more (cost-)efficient way. It also provided activists and civil society organizations more control over the content of their message and the tools to independently inform citizens and sympathizers worldwide. This strength is partly also often perceived as a weakness, since the Internet tends to strengthen the fragmentation of the public sphere into what Gitlin (1998) calls 'public sphericules'.

However, Gitlin, as well as other authors such as Putnam (1995, 2000) or Galston (2003), seem to imply that this fragmentation is to the detriment of democracy and leading to a non-committing 'lazy' politics. This is, however, not necessarily the case. As the World Social Forum and many coordinated actions against international organizations show, fragmentation does not *per se* exclude strategic cooperation between very different civil society associations – from very loose activist networks to structured and professional civil society organizations, labor unions, or even political parties, from revolutionary movements to reformist movements (Held and McGrew, 2002; Tarrow, 2005).

Similarly, coalition building also occurs at a national or local level, where activists can potentially be much more effective and influential than at an international or global level. In this regard, transnationalization and transnational activism should not merely be conceived as coordinated actions at an international level, or as activism embedded in a local/national context, but at the same time also as active at an inter – or transnational level of governance. Transnational activism can also be conceived as the transnational distribution and appropriation of counter-hegemonic discourses and action-strategies to a local setting. As Tarrow (2005: 103) points out when he writes, amongst others, on the worldwide diffusion of Ghandi's strategy of non-violent direct action and civil disobedience, this is not a new phenomenon:

Determined activists have always been able to adapt new forms of contention across borders. But with the growth of internationalization and global communication, diffusion has both increased and accelerated.

It will also be argued that an overemphasis on the Internet and communication as such tends to obscure that social change and achieving political aims has to be fought for beyond the media too. This involves gaining support, changing values, and influencing the political agenda, as much as the media agenda. Offe (1987:69) refers to this when he speaks of ‘non-institutional politics’. Beck (1994: 23) also points to this field of politics from below with his notion of sub-politics or ‘the non-institutional renaissance of the political’:

Sub-politics means shaping society from below. Viewed from above, this results in the loss of implementation power; the shrinkage and minimisation of politics. In the wake of sub-politicization, there are growing opportunities to have a voice and a share in the arrangement of society for groups hitherto uninvolved in the substantive technification and industrialisation process.

In mature democracies a complex interplay and overlap between non- and institutional politics can be observed. As such they cannot be construed as a dichotomy, but oscillate between convergence and contention. The state is not an entity separated from society and neither is there a clear distinction between what is called civil society and institutional and formal politics. Interpenetrations from institutional into non-institutional politics and vice versa occur at different levels and are essential. It is in this permanent organic process that media fulfil, increasingly so, a mediating and facilitating function (Bennett and Entman, 2001; Silverstone, 2005). However, in a democracy the extent and form of social change is not determined by the media, but by citizens – their (in)capacity, willingness, or unwillingness to change behavior, patterns of consumption, ways of life, and by this dynamic organic interaction between society and democratic institutions, deciding to encourage/promote change or resist/discipline it. Although the focus in this chapter is clearly on progressive movements and direct action, reactionary forces in society also transnationalize and adopt similar media strategies, which should not be ignored (Downing, 2001: 88).

Keeping these issues in mind, this chapter will analyze a particular form of localized transnational activism and their communication practices to foster their political aims, namely local activists who appropriate and adapt/adopt transnational discourses and action strategies to apply them in a local context. This ‘glocalized’ type of transnational activism will be explored by deconstructing the communication strategies of a group of young and radical activists and their sympathizers in their struggle to save a privately owned city forest in North Belgium. In the summer of 2001, activists occupied the Lappersfort forest on the outskirts of Bruges and stayed there for more than a year before being forcefully evicted by the police, executing a court order initiated by the owner Fabricom. This direct action was supported by a large coalition of very diverse civil society organizations, but also by some political parties and by local citizens.

This case [1] will show that the successful adoption and adaptation of transnational direct action strategies at a local level is not only dependent on a refined communication strategy directed towards core supporters, sympathizers, and the population at large, but as much on broad (local) popular and political support.

Activism and media

Although in mature democracies, violence is discredited as a means to achieve social change, direct actions are still very much a legitimate way of voicing dissent for activists and movements in their struggles. Gamson (1990: 87) argued that movements who do pursue violent revolutionary tactics 'seem to pay the cost of violence without gaining the benefits of employing it. They are both threatening and weak, and their repression becomes a low-cost strategy for those whom they attempt to displace'. However, after 9/11 and the attacks in Madrid, London and other parts of the world, this claim is increasingly untenable, at least at an international level and in terms of the costs of repression and its consequences for civil liberties in mature democracies.

Direct action strategies of progressive movements have undergone considerable changes in recent years, while at the same time also paying tribute to a historical legacy, such as the civic rights movement in the United States, the student movements of the 1960s, the women's right movement, the green movement and the gay rights movement (Gitlin, 1980; Freeman, 1984; Cruikshank, 1992; McAdam, 1999). Gamson was certainly right that the violent strategies of the Black Power movement were highly destructive for the civic rights movement. Both the green movement and the gay-rights movement illustrate that social change can be achieved through sustained non-violent struggle that involves both changing values and behaviors amongst the population, in youth culture, and through gradual often delayed re-active changes in legislation and regulation, be it regarding the adoption of a more ecological lifestyle, separating waste or a more tolerant and more open attitude towards gay and lesbian life-styles, protection against discrimination and opening up adoption and marriage to gays and lesbians (Feher and Heller, 1983: 37; Offe, 1987; Turner, 2001). As these examples already indicate, these struggles are less class-based than the traditional labor movement was, and their aims are also more geared at changing (certain) values within society. Their struggles concentrate more on the acceptance or normalization of different lifestyles and respect for difference, than on taking over power from the ruling classes. Melucci (1981: 179), from a New Social Movement perspective, points out that processes of social change involve foremost the development of an alternative counter-hegemonic discourse geared at changing values, attitudes, and behavior amongst citizens.

Today's activism and concerns relate more to what Giddens (1991: 214) calls 'life-politics':

Life politics concerns political issues which flow from processes of self-actualisation in post-traditional contexts, where globalising influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realization influence global strategies.

This points to the relevance of the self, as well as its relation with ‘the other’, also from a global perspective. Others refer to the notion of identity politics (du Preez, 1980; Calhoun, 1994; Bennett, 1998) to indicate changes within society, as well as in politics. It deals with the struggle for self-determination and recognition of cultural, sexual, ethnic differences, and against discrimination on the basis of these differences.

Life- and identity politics, although different, imply that politics is about much more than the stark – but now more latent – ideological divides between labor and capital and that the self, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religion are also political in their own right.

The advent of life- and identity politics also gives rise to concerns. Fraser (1996: 4) points to a progressive, but also to a fundamentalist form of identity politics. Similarly with life-politics the distinction could be made between a solidarity perspective, focussing on abolishing world poverty for example and an individualistic perspective, as is the case with NIMBY-activism [2]. Life- and identity politics have also given rise to a splinterization in demands, claims, and aims, lacking an overall underpinning ideological framework. This also exposes a key debate and conflict within political theory, namely between those celebrating difference and focussing on recognition, embedded in a culturalist perspective (Taylor, 1994) and those, such as Gitlin (1995), embedded in a more Political Economy paradigm, who reduce identity politics to ‘a counterproductive diversion from the real economic issues, one that balkanizes groups and rejects universalist moral norms’, as summarized by Fraser (1996: 10). Instead Fraser asserts that culture versus economy, recognition of identity versus a redistributive project are false anti-theses, that social, economic, and political realities cannot be essentialized or reduced to single dimensions. She argues for a more open, flexible, and overlapping conception of these dualisms that does justice

both to the apparent institutional separation of economy and culture in capitalist society and to their interpenetration. It alone can conceptualize the possibility of practical tensions between claims for redistribution and claims for recognition (Fraser, 1996: 66).

What Fraser also implies is that it is impossible to address issues of identity without accounting for economic interests and the mediating role of politics to

redress injustices, not only relating to respect and recognition of difference, but as much in terms of socio-economic injustices, local and global.

To frame the diversity and multiplicity, but at the same time the rather loose inter-connectedness of current day struggles, and the role of media and communication in sustaining and supporting them, the ‘multitude’ - a notion originally developed by Spinoza and re-introduced into political theory by Hardt and Negri (2004) - might also be useful. According to Hardt and Negri (2004: 105), the multitude can be conceived as the ‘multiplicity of all these singular differences’. As such it allows ‘the social multiplicity to manage to communicate and act in common while remaining internally different’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: xiv). In replying to the criticisms that the multitude puts itself in dialectic opposition to power, Negri (2002, translation by Arianna Bove) defends his interpretation of Foucault’s analytics of power as:

an analysis of a regional system of institutions of struggles, crossings and confrontations, and these antagonistic struggles open up on omnilateral horizons. This concerns both the surface of the relations of force and the ontology of ourselves.

Negri also points to the dialectic between two basic forms of power: constituted power that is characterized as re-active, resting with the state and with its role to mediate conflicting interests; and the unmediated constituent – active – power of the multitude. The constituted power of the state is being legitimized and challenged at the same time by the constituent power of the multitude. The social contract, which legitimizes state authority and sovereignty, rests on the pacification of conflicts and antagonisms (Negri, 1999: 29), but cannot be seen as fixed. It is permanently being re-negotiated and challenged, never reaching a perfect ideal solution. This points to the flexible ability of the capitalist paradigm to re-act and transform itself to accommodate demands and pacify conflicts, for the time being, until new demands emerge.

As Urry (1999: 318) rightly states, ‘Citizenship has always necessitated symbolic resources distributed through various means of mass communication’. Media thus play a crucial role in the mediation, the convergence of different interests, spheres, and actors, as well as in exposing the tensions and divergences between them. This can be seen in terms of the intrusion of alternative into mainstream public spheres – providing a platform for alternative discourses, in terms of representation – normalizing alternative discourses or lifestyles, but also in terms of being a battleground over meanings and conceptions of what constitutes the public interest and the common good (Mouffe, 1999).

Communication strategies of activists, be they Internet-based, or using pamphlets, stickers, community radio, and even getting attention by the

mainstream media, should be seen in a dynamic relationship with each other and not in a dichotomous way.

Most recent empirical studies on activism within Media and Communication Studies focus foremost on the opportunities and constraints the Internet provides in organizing movements, 'networking', mobilizing online, as well as offline, and/or strengthening the public sphere by facilitating discussion and the development of counter-hegemonic discourses (Hill and Hughes, 1998; Dahlberg, 2001; Webster, 2001; Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2002; Van Audenhove *et al.*, 2002; Meikle, 2002; Gibson *et al.*, 2003; McCaughey and Ayers, 2003; van de Donk *et al.*, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005). Alternative information needs alternative channels of distribution and the Internet provides activists with a user-friendly medium for the unbiased and especially the (cost-)efficient distribution of alternative information across the boundaries of time and space. Its viral characteristics are in this regard an important asset (Rushkoff, 1996), whereby individuals pass on information through mailing lists or by forwarding the information to their personal and/or professional networks. As such, alternative information can spread rapidly at a limited cost. Besides this, websites allow activists and social movements to be more in control of their message and self-representation, which can be seen as empowering (Rucht, 2004). In this regard, websites, e-mail, forums, and mailing-lists are used extensively to distribute and share alternative information, to mobilize and organize internally or in coalitions with other organizations, and to a lesser extent also to debate issues and strategies (Cammaerts, 2005).

While the Internet increasingly constitutes an opportunity structure for activists and social movements, in terms of self-representation, mobilizing for (direct) actions, or distributing information, this clearly has to be seen as being embedded in a larger communication strategy, including other media and ways to distribute their aims and goals. In this regard, (positive) attention in the mainstream media, pamphlets or community radios are as important as it relates more to reaching a broader constituency than those already convinced. An example in this regard is the coverage of the protests against the EU summit in Brussels in December 2001, where Indymedia pooled-up with community and university radios as well as an art cinema house to form Radio Bruxxel [3]. During four days, volunteers and activists produced radio programs covering the summit from a critical left-wing perspective. These not only featured on the participating radio stations, all located in Brussels, but were also streamed live through the Internet, allowing other activists-radios worldwide to pick-up the feed and re-transmit it on FM. Besides this, Indymedia also distributed many stickers, brochures, and pamphlets during the demonstrations. This shows that a pre-dominantly Internet-based organization, such as Indymedia, is aware that although penetration rates of the Internet have risen in recent years (at least in the West), the digital divide is still a reality for many people, especially so for disadvantaged groups in society. The Internet

is also very much a pull-medium, meaning that citizens need to be already informed and interested to go and seek information about the activists and their aims. As such, activists necessarily need to diversify their media-strategies hence the use of other media such as (community) radio or print.

Finally, studies trying to make sense of the impact of the Internet on activism often point to its capacity to transnationalize struggles and build coalitions beyond the nation state (Della Porta *et al.*, 1999; Florini, 2000; Tarrow, 2001; Cammaerts, 2005). These studies also point out that different types of transnationalization can be observed. The first type could be called ‘trans-international’ activism, strongly organized and integrated at a transnational level, with staff or members dispersed internationally and aiming to translate local ‘grass roots’ issues and interests to a global level of governance. Examples of this type are Transparency International (TI), striving for good and open government, or the Association for Progressive Communication (APC), struggling, amongst others, for communication rights. A second type of transnationalization is ‘trans-national’ activism in that the transnational provides a common frame of reference, but local/national cells have relative independence. At the same time local struggles link-up with an international or regional agenda and vice versa. Examples of this type are Indymedia or ATTAC, but also ‘older’ organizations, such as Greenpeace or Amnesty International, clearly embedded in a local (offline) context too. However, besides these two, a third – more abstract – type of transnationalization can be identified, which could tentatively be called ‘glocal’ activism. In local struggles at a national level transnational discourses and action-methods are ‘imported’ and consequently appropriated and adapted to the local context. This chapter explores this latter ‘more localized’ type of transnationalization.

This chapter also concurs with Diani’s observation, referring to Della Porta (1988) that:

Participatory movement organisations – especially the most radical – are more dependent upon direct, face-to-face interactions, for the purpose both of recruiting members and of securing their commitment. Engaging in what are potentially high-risk activities requires a high level of trust and collective identification which is unlikely to develop if not supported by face-to-face interaction (Diani, 2001: 126).

Although media and communication are increasingly important in different ways, as will be shown later, the offline or the more banal micro-level of having a drink together and building trust, developing a collective identity and framework of reference, and negotiating different identities, is not to be neglected in any account of activism. Besides this, also the formal institutional level of politics and the dynamic relationship between the non-institutional and the institutional

remains relevant. In this regard can be referred to what Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 216–17) call the ongoing negotiations between the ‘molecular’ – the micro level of the political and the ‘molar’ – the structural segmentations at a macro-political level:

Molecular escapes and movements would be nothing if they did not return to the molar organisations to reshuffle their segments, their binary distributions of sexes, classes and parties.

This relates to the inherent dynamic relationship between the constituent power of the multitude and the constituting powers of the state. From a framing-perspective, McAdam (2005: 119) identifies six strategic challenges for movements that really aim to become ‘a force for social change’ and also integrates both facets. The first two challenges are inward oriented: recruiting core-activists and sustaining the organization. This has been covered extensively by the dominant literature on social movements (for an overview see Della Porta and Diani, 1999). The four other challenges for activists can be characterized as more outward oriented. They relate to getting attention in the mainstream media, to mobilizing beyond those already convinced, to over-coming social control, as well as possible repression and finally to ‘shape public policy and state action’ (McAdam, 2000: 119).

Different media impact in different ways on each of these strategic aims. We will return to these strategic aims and their relation to media and communication later. First, an analysis will be presented of the glocalised direct action that was the occupation of the Lappersfort forest. The context of the action will be outlined, the media-strategies assessed, as well as the political implications and strategies to influence state action, without ignoring the economic interests at play.

Communication strategies of glocal activism: occupying the Lappersfort forest

Discourses of forest preservation and the technique of occupation, building tree-cabins and a maze of tunnels is not new. This tactic originated in the United Kingdom where a group of local activists from Norwich, calling themselves the flowerpot tribe, occupied a small forest to stop the building of a bypass in 1993. They belonged to a worldwide movement called Earth First! [4] and were also illustrative of the radicalization of the ecological movement in the United Kingdom (Anonymous, 2003). The transnationalizing strategies and discourses led the radicalization of the ecological movement to spread fairly rapidly to other countries.

Context

Activists occupied the threatened Lappersfort forest on the fringes of the provincial city of Bruges (Belgium) in August 2001, using similar tactics as their

United Kingdom counterparts some years earlier. The aim of this occupation was to save the forest from being chopped down to make way for a road, an industrial terrain and a bus station for which Fabricom, the owner of the forest and part of the multinational Tractebel, had received permission from the local authorities. While the activists were a small radical anarchist group, their action was promptly supported by a larger constituency of civil society organizations, which made that the discourses relating to the aims of the action were amplified exponentially. This coalition of 103 small and larger, mainly environmental, organizations was called the Green Belt Front (Groene Gordel Front). Beyond that, a so-called protection committee was set-up to which some 400 sympathizers of different backgrounds – citizens, artists (...) and celebrities – signed-up. Besides this, there were also a number of befriended civil servants that did not openly support the action, but provided valuable information regarding the forest and planning decisions.

As such, three concentric circles of support around the radical activists occupying the forest could be identified; the Green Belt Front of supporting environmental and other civil society organizations, the so-called protection-committee of citizens sympathizing with the cause and lastly an informal and above all invisible network of contacts within the administration.

In September 2002, after one year of occupation, Fabricom summoned the activists to court. The judge subsequently ordered the activists to leave the forest immediately and to pay an ‘occupying fee’ of 1€ per person per day for as long as they remained in the forest. As the green party was part of the Government and had self-evidently a lot of sympathy for the action, the Flemish green minister for the environment started negotiations with the owner Fabricom with the intent to buy and thus save the forest.

However, by mid-October 2002, the mayor of Bruges, who sympathized with Fabricom’s plans for the forest, ran out of patience and he ordered the police to forcefully evict the activists from the forest. A few hours after the police started their action, a spontaneous demonstration of sympathizers was mobilized in the vicinity of the forest, but almost everybody was arrested. The police acted coercively and pro-active, arresting as much activists as possible as well as sympathizers arriving at the train station. In the afternoon some 150 sympathizers assembled in front of the City Hall to hold a noise-demonstration; many of them were arrested too. By the evening on the same day another protest started in the city centre of Bruges, which was attended by some 500 people, with more local citizens joining the activists. No more arrests were made. This showed that the activists had generated considerable support and sympathy from the local population, many of which were also in favor of saving the forest. All this culminated in yet another demonstration the next weekend, which more than 4.000 people attended (Indymedia, 2002a, b). Undisputedly, it was one of the biggest demonstrations the provincial city of Bruges had seen to date. Indymedia reported on Els, a mother of three children, present in the big demonstration:

Yes, I'm a mother of three and that is precisely why I think it is important to be here. It's about the future of our children. This forest has to be saved [...] I think it is very exciting that there are so many people. Now I hope that something is done too. It is very important that we raise our voices, but they have to listen too (Indymedia, 2002h, translation by the author).

Media and communication strategies

The case of the Lappersfort forest is a prime example of how ICTs, such as the Internet, but also mobile communication, can foster and sustain real-life direct action, networking, and mobilization. The activists put up their own website [5] where citizens and sympathizers could find information, a petition, contact-information, new actions, etc. Having a site of their own allowed the activists more control over their own message, their self-representation, and it also served as a means to attract new sympathizers and activists.

The site of Indymedia-Belgium was also used frequently as a platform to communicate independently to a wider 'alternative' public of sympathizers and fellow activists, which was then subsequently also picked up by other Independent Media Centres, amongst others in the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands [6]. Like all independent media centres, Indymedia-Belgium acted as a valuable interface for direct action. As such a lot of information could be found regarding the occupation, the rulings of the judge, the violent eviction from the forest, and the actions that ensued [7]. Indymedia also serves as an alternative source for journalists looking for another perspective, besides the official one, as well as an entrance-point to contact activists.

One of the interesting articles on the Indymedia-site, giving an insight in the strategies of the activists, was an urgent call for research on the owner of the forest, posted in English.

Urgent call from Lappersfront: we want to know our enemy, and we're looking for people that have the time and the knowledge to do this properly. And yes, we're looking for DIRTY business. Fabricom Group is one of the super-lobbying-bastards that are destroying the planet. Lappersfort against Fabricom = David against Goliath (Indymedia, 2002c).

This also resulted, amongst others, in a short occupation of the offices of Fabricom in Gent (Indymedia, 2002d), as well as the posting of e-mail addresses of Fabricom employers 'harvested' through Google (Indymedia, 2002e). The focus on Fabricom also shows that this local struggle of saving the forest was embedded in the wider struggle against neo-liberalism and global capitalism, hence the involvement of organizations such as ATTAC for example, inter-linking different struggles.

The Internet also played an important role in mobilizing activists before and after the evictions started. This real possibility was prepared well in advance.

When the judge ruled that they had to leave the forest, the following message appeared on the site of Indymedia-Belgium:

The Lappersfront launches a call to all sympathizers: To those who can make themselves available when the police clears the forest, we ask to leave an email-address or a telephone-number to Pat; CALL or EMAIL: Xx.x@pandora.be, 0497/XX-XX-XX. You will not have to be in the forest yourself, but you can help by forming a buffer (Indymedia, 2002f, translation by the author).

In this regard, it is also noteworthy to mention the extensive use of mobile cell-phones besides e-mail for internal organizational purposes, as well as for mobilizing at short notice.

When the police actually started their action, almost simultaneously an alert mobilization call was sent out through mobile communication and the Internet.

URGENT MOBILIZATION: 16h00 Town Hall Bruges - Emergency protest meeting for the saving of the Lappersfort forest (...) Please forward this message to as many people and post it on as many lists and websites as possible (Indymedia, 2002g, translation by the author).

A few hours later ATTAC-Flanders distributed a call for a next day's demonstration in front of the offices of Tractebel in Brussels under the heading 'Our world is not for sale'; some 100 people showed-up. In this regard, the economic interests underlying this struggle need to be highlighted. While at first sight this is an environmental struggle, it is at the same time also a conflict between different conceptions of the common good, the limits and rights of private ownership, and the powers/weakness of the state to intervene.

Although the Internet was crucial for initial alert-mobilizations on the day itself, the mobilization for the large demonstration on the weekend following eviction was much wider, tapping into the mobilizing potential of the coalition of organizations and sympathizers, as well as using mainstream media, pamphlets and word of mouth. The uses of the Internet could thus be characterized as foremost being instrumental in facilitating the mobilization of initial support, the recruitment of new activists and the organization of resistance to the eviction and social control.

Luc Vanneste, chairman of the Green Belt Front, also identifies another important – less instrumental, but constitutive – function of the Internet, namely sustaining a network in the long term:

The sites, the mailings, the press-releases keep the network going, prevents it from falling asleep. It serves to remain vigilant even if nothing happens... to be prepared for when the enemy re-emerges... to service the machine, oil it, so that it can be started-up again quickly, if need be! (e-mail Luc Vanneste – 2 January 2006, translation by the author).

Another more elusive potential of the Internet relates to the everyday micro-context of activists. The distance and relative anonymity of the Internet is often deemed to be a negative attribute in terms of the democratic potential of the Internet, but here is shown that this distance can also be seen as a strength, as it allows different identities to co-exist side by side, as an activist, as an employee and/or as a parent and partner. Jozef De Coster, a former chairman of the Green Belt Front, refers to this:

Most of the activists and sympathizers in the Lappersfort-case have a full-time job. Being called up during working hours for urgent co-ordination or actions would be considered too intrusive. A few of them, who work for the government or for companies dealing with Fabricom or the city of Bruges also run the danger of being caught 'collaborating' with the Lappersfronters and the Green Belt Front. Sympathizers that are being informed and mobilized through email, can decide themselves when to dedicate time and attention to 'the action'. As such, they can easily adapt their action-rhythm to the highs and lows in their own personal and professional timeframes (e-mail Jozef De Coster, 6 February 2006, translation by the author).

The importance of the Internet should, however, not be exaggerated. A good relationship with the mainstream press was also one of the strengths of the activists. Inviting journalists into the forest, providing them with a good story and a clear-cut message: 'what is forest, stays forest'. The fact that the action lasted for such a long time and the easy-to-communicate cause made the media construct them as perseverant and likeable. This is by no means self-evident as representations of protest-movements, and direct actions are often biased towards negative representations (Lee and Solomon, 1990). This is why a media-savvy strategy directed at the mainstream media is crucial.

The activists acknowledged 'the forces of the fourth power', thereby referring to the press, and the need for their support to sustain the direct action. On their website, four ethical principles in dealing with the local and national media are presented:

1. *don't hate the media, be the media*
2. *a correct relationship with the press*
3. *we cannot, won't, should not determine the agenda of the fourth power*
4. *transparency in internal governance and action. (For example, the 'subjects' of our press-releases, the city council, the company Fabricom, etc. – always get a copy).*
(Site GGF: <http://www.ggf.be/index.htm>, translation by the author.)

This can be framed as a dynamic, open, and basic-democratic communication strategy, combining self-representation with respect for the logic of mainstream media and news-production.

In the beginning of the action, there was only limited attention from the mainstream press for the occupation and the issue of forest-preservation. When the activists managed to sustain their action, the media-logics of an ongoing story started to play. The activists' stubborn struggle, remaining in the forest during the winter, became a story that was covered in all newspapers, in television news broadcasts, and in infotainment programs. The activists were increasingly represented as idealist young people who had given-up everything for a just cause and willing to live in difficult 'cold' circumstances for that cause.

This raised sympathy for the activists and their aims. Moreover, during the summer times, the activists opened-up the forest, which had been closed to the general public for many years. Schools visited the forest and the occupiers and several cultural events were organized, which were again covered by the local and national press. These events also attracted large crowds and gave local citizens the opportunity to visit the forest and the activists a way to get their message across in a positive setting. This can also be related to the introduction of popular and youth sub-cultures into activist strategies. In an e-mail, Luc Vanneste, chairman of the Green Belt Front, also points to the organizational importance of the forest as a location for holding meetings and forging links between activists inside the forest and outside, as well as with civil society organizations:

Crucial for that time was that the occupied forest served so to speak as a roundtable/free-place/local pub where everybody met. The good contact with the people of Indymedia West-Flanders also stems from meetings in the forest. That period of intense bonding in an accessible forest with accessible occupiers is of course the motor and energy that keeps us going, up until today (e-mail Luc Vanneste, 2 January 2006, translation by the author).

The Internet is most useful at the level of internal communication between dispersed activists, although here the importance of face-to-face interaction in building trust should not be ignored. Besides this, the Internet also serves as a way to pull sympathizers from the periphery into the core, but in line with Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: 116) social movements also need mainstream media to 'broaden the scope of conflict' and push its message to a mass audience.

In other words, for a direct action to resonate beyond a 'ghettoized' community of like-minded, beyond the fragmented public sphericules of the (spl)Internet, where you need to be already interested or semi-informed in order to actively seek information regarding the aims of the action, activist communication strategies also need to be directed towards the mainstream public sphere. In this regard, a push-strategy is enacted in an attempt to reach a broader constituency and gain public support, which then can potentially transform into political influence.

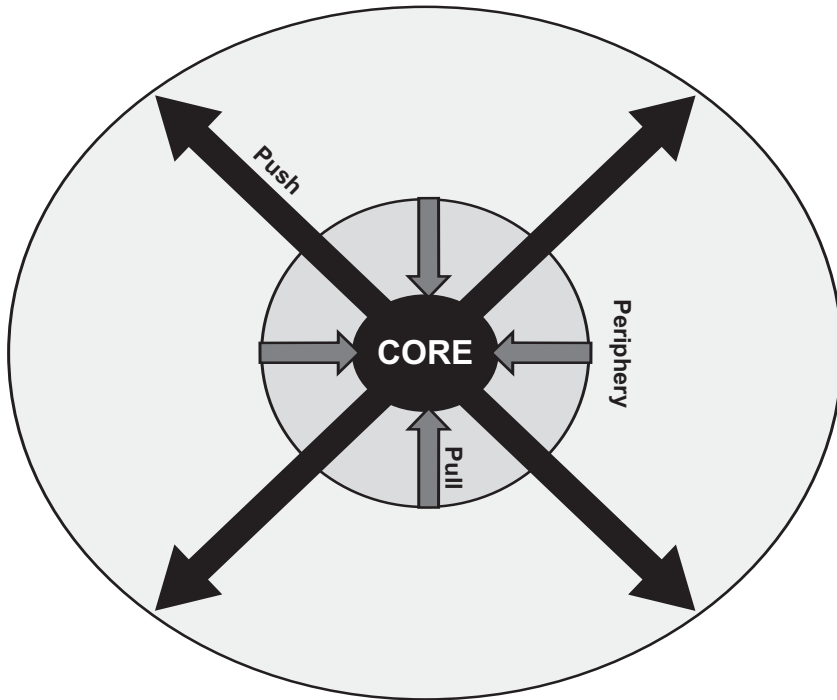


Figure 1: Activist communication strategy model.

The model in Figure 1 attempts to capture these different activist media usages directed at different target groups. Within the core group, face-to-face communication, mobile communication as well as point-to-point Internet communication, is important. The Internet and especially mailing lists are also useful to pull sympathizers situated at the periphery into the core group or sustain the dynamism within the movement. Communication strategies directed at the mainstream media represent a push strategy towards a broader audience, be it local or national.

It can be concluded that this fairly successful direct action adopted a dual communication strategy combining an independent voice through the Internet directed at core supporters and a mediated voice through local and national press directed at the general population. Referring to Ruchts' (2004: 36) quadruple 'A' in activist media strategies – 'abstention, attack, adaptation and alternatives', the Lappersfort case clearly combined adaptation to the logic of mass media with developing alternatives in the form of 'movement controlled media' in order to 'secure autonomy and operational flexibility' (Rucht, 2004: 55).

In this regard our analysis also concurs with Hill and Hughes' (1998: 186) observation that:

The Net is not going to radically change us; we are moulding it to our own ways of thinking and action. It is neither a monstrosity nor a saviour; it is a new venue for the same old human compunction: politics.

Real politik

To have a real impact on society, and also subsequently on the formal democratic process, a direct action or an innovative idea must be able to generate citizen and political support. This in turn requires, amongst others, mobilization, attention in the mainstream media and building coalitions with other civil society organizations. The three concentric circles of support ensured not only that the Lappersfort forest stayed on the political agenda but also that the pressure for finding a solution to save the forest remained present after the activists were forcefully evicted.

This case is also relevant because of the complex inter-relations and tensions between the activists and their aims, the interests of the private owner, and the state, all of which cannot be conceived as singular actors. Within civil society, the labor unions were very reluctant to support the action and reacted at times even fairly aggressively towards the activists, as exemplified by the statement of a labor union representative that their ‘attitude is more negative than the Vlaams Blok’ [8], associating them with the North Belgian post-fascist party. This also shows that the attempts to link the environment and the non-material to other (more economic) struggles have only partly succeeded, as many, especially in the labor movement, still place ecology in opposition to economy.

Similarly, the state can also be seen as wavering in this regard. While the local authorities supported the owner Fabricom and had issued planning permissions for the forest to be ‘used for other purposes’, the regional government was much more susceptible to the aims of the activists and their sympathizers. As the action was generating support and sympathy amongst the broader population, catalyzed by the mainstream media, several political parties started to take stances. During the summer of 2002, the North Belgian minister for the environment, Vera Dua (Green Party), visited the activists in the Lappersfort forest. When the eviction started, she also issued a press-release condemning the eviction and at the same time putting more pressure on the owners of the forest to sell:

The Minister would like to point out that an encounter was planned this week between the Minister and Fabricom about the possible purchase of the Lappersfort-forest. The Minister had therefore urged, Fabricom as well as the municipal authorities in Bruges, to wait for the outcome of these negotiations. The Minister is appalled that this did not happen. Apparently there are people who don’t want a fair solution’, the Minister concludes. ‘We want to buy the forest and give Bruges a city-forest like no other Flemish city has. We want to

do this, but only at a reasonable price' (Cabinet of the Flemish Minister for the Environment, 2002, translation by the author).

Besides the involvement of a minister, individual representatives of the North Belgian socialist party and a leftish liberal party called SPIRIT signed-up to support the action and its aims. Even at the time of writing the Green Belt Front still counts two ministers in its so-called 'protection committee'. In this regard, it is relevant to note that the Green Belt Front decided to keep political parties out of the front itself, but welcomed individual politicians to join a supportive committee. Vanneste confirms this:

Political parties did want to become member of the civil society coalition, but it was a conscious decision to only invite politicians to join the protection committee. It's a matter of safeguarding our own agenda. Of course, behind the scenes there was intense co-operation at times (Mail Luc Vanneste, 2 January 2006, translation by the author).

Nevertheless, this case also shows that there was 'intense co-operation' and that the state cannot be conceptualized as one entity, but constituting of different forces, some resisting change, others promoting or supporting change.

The case of the occupation of the Lappersfort forest illustrates how struggles by a radical group of young activists can raise a high level of passive engagement or sympathy, which can even transform into active civic engagement and policy-influence at a certain moment in time. Not unimportant in this regard is that the long struggle to save the Lappersfront forest was supported by the local population. Opening-up the forest to the public for visits and walks, the organization of cultural activities in the summer and also many positive accounts of the action in the mainstream media all played a positive role.

However, reality is messy, and despite the support from the local population, the mainstream and off-stream media, as well as (some) formal political actors, the forest is still not saved in its entirety. The new minister for the environment, a Christian Democrat who previously headed an employer's organization for medium and small enterprises, delayed reaching a compromise due to corporate pressures of having office-space close to the city centre. As such, 4 years after the occupation, negotiations regarding the future destination of the forest are still ongoing. Vigilance and persistent action by the civil society coalition and the members of the protection committee have, however, prevented the destruction of the forest to date. Some 70% of the forest is now permanently saved and will become a city-forest, while some 30% is still under threat of being cut down to harbor offices and a road.

This also shows that in politics in the real world you seldom get everything you want. Diverging and conflicting interests always shape political decisions.

In this specific case, corporate and/or economic interests did not exactly prevail, but neither were they ignored.

Conclusions

Activists are aware that the Internet, although very useful, also has its limits in terms of reaching a broad audience. Indymedia, for example, would never have existed without the Internet, but nevertheless they produce brochures and pamphlets to raise awareness of their existence, but also to distribute part of their content to an audience that has no access to the Internet. In terms of the Lappersfort case, it can be concluded that the Internet did play an important role in terms of initial/alert mobilization and self-representation, in terms of organizing the struggle, but also in sustaining the action and keeping a connection between the activists and their sympathizers. Besides this, it also has to be said that in the end the positive representations in the mainstream media played an important role in terms of mobilizing beyond the activists and sympathizers, much more so than the Internet.

Table 1 relates the communication and media strategy enacted in this case to the different challenges put forward earlier by McAdam (2005: 119).

What Table 1 does not capture, however, is the organic hybrid interplay between the online and the offline that goes on within the civil society coalition, as well as the formal and informal network of sympathizers, combining face-to-face meetings and social/cultural activities with online interaction and exchange. It also does not account for the more tacit impact the Internet has on the practice of activism. Relevant in this regard is that the Internet is a non-intrusive medium that allows citizens to determine and control the degree of their involvement, as well as balancing out their engagement with other roles they have. As such, this also confirms other research suggesting that contrary to what is commonly perceived, the weak ties that the Internet enables, contributes to the ability of citizens to participate and engage and manage the degree of their involvement (Granovetter, 1982; Haythornthwaite, 2005; Kavanaugh *et al.*, 2005). In a way we need to de-essentialize the virtual and the real and respect different identities and different degrees of participation.

However, this case also shows that it is important to transform weak ties into strong ties. In this regard, a too media- or Internet-centric approach to activism and social change should be avoided. Such a reductionist view holds the danger that the offline realm is black-boxed. The importance of the nitty-gritty of lobbying, making your case, formulating a consistent counter-discourse, writing letters/e-mails to newspapers, journalists, and politicians, putting pressure on politicians and other stakeholders, holding meetings to coordinate actions, and indeed also of offline direct actions and social activities, tend to be ignored in popular accounts of hacktivism or media activism. It is, however, in that 'real' messy world that social change has to be argued for the most, winning over the 'hearts and minds' of citizens and political actors. Local citizen support and the

Table 1:

Communication strategies of the Lappersfort activists

| | Online | Offline |
|--|---|---|
| Recruit: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mailing lists • Website • Indymedia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face contacts • Social and cultural activities |
| Sustain: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mailing lists • Point-to-point e-mail • Mobile communication • Indymedia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face meetings • Social and cultural activities |
| Media coverage: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-mails to journalists | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face contacts • Specific strategy directed at mainstream media |
| Mobilize beyond: | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coverage in the mainstream media • Pamphlets • Social and cultural activities |
| Constrain control and repression: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile • E-mail coordination • Website | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustained action • Demonstrations • Coverage of police violence |
| Shape politics: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile • E-mail | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face lobby efforts |

involvement of formal political actors has most probably been more important to the success of a direct action or for the introduction of innovative ‘alternative’ discourses in society than the Internet as such.

Clever communication strategies certainly contributed to the success of this action, but the determination of the activists, the sustained actions and lobby-efforts, as well as their ability to generate support amongst the population and the press for their cause and strategy was at least equally important. In this regard, the Lappersfort case shows how a direct action, persistently organized by radical activists, can nevertheless be very present in the dominant public sphere and influence the political agenda by tapping into transnational strategies and struggles, in this case forest preservation as well as the anti-globalization movement, while at the same time ensuring that they have a local base and support for their direct action.

Finally, this case shows that contrary to the observations of Gitlin (1980) in the 1970s, fragmented oppositional movements composed of groups and organizations with distinct political ideologies and strategies are able to converge much easier at a given moment in time to foster common aims, whereby the

Internet is increasingly becoming a lubricating infrastructure to enable that. As such, the Lappersfort case can also be deconstructed as the multitude in action. It illustrates the mutual hybrid interpenetrations between non-institutional and institutional politics, exposing the complex relationships between the molecular and molar, to use the metaphors of Deleuze and Guatari. In this regard, the state cannot be constructed as a singular actor, but nor can civil society. The labor movement was very reluctant to support the action and parts of the state resisted, while other parts supported the activists. Intersecting this are economic interests and the political debate on how as a society we reconcile economic interests with social and ecological concerns. It is very much democracy at work with media in a supporting and facilitating role.

Notes for Chapter Twelve

- [1] The author would like to thank Luc Vanneste and others of the Green Belt Front (Groene Gordel Front) who gave valuable feedback to drafts of this chapter, thereby also increasing the validity of the analysis.
- [2] Nevertheless the point that NIMBY-activism is more complex than often thought, raised by Auli Harju in this book, is well taken.
- [3] <http://www.nova-cinema.com/main.php?page=archives/2001/52/08radiobxxl.en.htm> (consulted 1 March 2006). The radios involved were Radio Air Libre, Radio Panik, FM Brussel, and Radio Campus.
- [4] <http://www.earthfirst.org/>.
- [5] <http://www.lappersfront.tk> (not online anymore). Also the external communication of the activists was fairly quickly taken over by the site of the Green Belt Front (Groene Gordel Front – <http://www.ggf.be>), as well as by using Indymedia to communicate with sympathizers in Belgium and beyond.
- [6] <http://www.indymedia.nl/nl/2002/09/6262.shtml> or <http://indymedia.org.uk/en/2002/10/44817.html>.
- [7] For an overview in English, go to <http://www.indymedia.be/news/2002/10/36569.php>. The fact that some effort was put in translating contributions in English is also relevant in itself, in view of transnationalizing this specific struggle and to reach out to a wider (global) constituency of likeminded activists.
- [8] Quoted in *Het Nieuwsblad – regio Brugge*, 22 May 2004, translation by the author.

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