

ICT-Usage among Transnational Social Movements in the Networked Society: to organise, to mediate & to influence

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Dr. Bart Cammaerts (ASCoR – UvA)

Dr. Leo Van Audenhove (STB – TNO)

Executive Summary

This EMTEL project and report deals with the usage of ICTs and more specifically the Internet among transnational social movements in terms of organisation, in terms of mediation of participation and in terms of influencing public opinion or other political actors.

1. Main Research Questions

- How do transnational social movement organisations use the Internet to organise themselves, both locally and transnationally?
- How do transnational social movement organisations use the Internet to facilitate or enable online civic engagement?
- How do transnational social movement organisations relate to policy and the political and in what way do ICTs play a role in this?

Based on a typology of “Virtual” Organisations four cases have been selected in order to answer these questions: APC (www.apc.org) as umbrella organisation, LabourStart (www.labourstart.org) as portal organisation, ATTAC (www.attac.org) as platform organisation and Indymedia (www.indymedia.org) as web organisation.

2. Most Important Findings

2.1 Organisational Use of ICTs

Different gradations exist between, at the one end of the spectrum organisations like APC with a formal membership structure and strong transnational ties, as well as organisations such as LabourStart, very decentralised and strong transnational ties, as there is no local organisation. But at the other end, organisations such as ATTAC and Indymedia with a strong local base and community of activists and sympathisers, independent, but at the same time loosely connected to a transnational frame of reference. The high degree of transnationalisation in all organisations also has to be shaded by observations that the poorest parts of the world are often absent, that there exist cultural and language barriers, and that resources are unevenly distributed. Also, not all organisations have, what one could call, goals of global reach. At this level, one could make a distinction between those

organisations whose main goal is primarily global, and those organisations whose main goal is local, but situated in a global problematic.

A strong degree of transnationalisation also relates to a strong degree of virtualisation. The online is very present and in most cases crucial at the intra-transnational level of organisation. In almost all cases, the virtualisation of activities at this level is very strong, whereas the real life activities are low. At this level, the Internet provides small organisations with new means of cheap, highly flexible and instantaneous communication. This enables organisational decentralisation and at the same time co-operation and integration possible. Without the Internet, it would be hard or even impossible for many of the organisations to organise and co-ordinate actions at the transnational level. At the local or national level, real-life becomes more important in terms of organising, except when the local context requires decentralisation, as in the case of Indymedia Germany. As such, it can be concluded that strong transnational ties in combination with decentralisation leads to a predominant role of the online in the communication and interaction within the organisation, between organisations and with the outside world.

2.2 Mediation of Participation

Besides the organisational use of ICTs this study also set out to assess new forms of ICT mediated civic engagement in the realm of broadening the public sphere. The Internet provides social movements with the possibility to construct public or semi-public spaces and to facilitate online civic engagement. This can take different forms: mailing lists, open web forums, semi-open web forums, closed web forums, spontaneous web forums, etc. The three cases of inter-active engagement that were examined, showed that forums and mailing lists can be very vibrant at times, but also that many constraints exist in this regard. The first constraint relates to access, in many countries only a minority of people have access, especially on a global scale, but also within developed countries. Organisations with a local base are more inclined to develop concrete strategies to counter this paradox (by diversifying their media-offer for example). The second constraint has to do with the homogeneous ideological framework and often-limited number of active participants in web forums or mailing lists (cf. ATTAC & LabourStart). The third constraint is the opposite of the second, namely that a strong diversity of opinions combined with a lack of moderation, can lead to flaming and insults, killing discussion (cf. Indymedia). Finally, it is also often

unclear where the discussion leads us, no conclusions are drawn and the participants are predominantly male.

Due to all these constraints, real interactive debate between participants is overall not very high. Many people only post one message, or register without being active. The spontaneous Indymedia forum is maybe the exception in this regard, as it was short and very intense and you could participate anonymously. Besides all this, it has to be noted that—notwithstanding these many constraints—forums and discussion mailing lists provide public or semi-public spaces where interactive debates are held. They are also used to diffuse opinions or information, which can stimulate or nourish debate. As such, the forum or mailing list represents a temporary community for those that interact and to a lesser extend for those who are passively following the discussions and receiving alternative opinions and information.

2.3. Policy and Politics

All cases adhere to the same broad goals and leftist ideologies. There are however certainly other civil society organisations promoting opposite ideologies at the transnational level, but we chose to limit ourselves to progressive social movements. To the extent that some of these transnational movements are slowly succeeding in getting recognised as advisory and negotiating organisations, both at big international for and in international institutions, their impact on international policy is probably growing. We, however, do not support the view that the Internet can be sufficient in driving this evolution. We believe that only those organisations with a real life component and a certain institutionalisation—often by means of choosing representatives and thus a certain hierarchy—can yield an impact at this level of governance. Indymedia might be important in terms of supporting an alternative transnational public sphere; it will have little direct impact on international governance and policy. Indymedia does not lobby or enter into dialogue with formal politics and concentrates on direct action as main strategy. An advocacy organisation such as APC is much more structured and is in the “business” of representing other organisations at the international level. ATTAC has a double strategy, by putting pressure on local governments through the local branches as well as on the international level through ATTAC-international, it hopes to achieve policy change. ATTAC combines lobbying with direct action. LabourStart does not directly influence policy, but the international labour movement, of which it is part, does have its lobby-structures in almost every country.

Different organisations adopt different strategies to achieve their political goals, both online and offline. But, what does this say about the role of ICTs in terms of the political and political action? Besides the conclusion that ICTs are deemed not to be very relevant in terms of lobbying, not much. The case of the battle for the preservation of the Lappersfort-forest frames the use of ICTs much better. The Internet played an important role in gaining initial support, in mobilising at very short notice, in organising the protests and demonstrations (amongst others by ATTAC), and in informing the general public independently (through Indymedia). On the other hand, formal politics came to engage with the issue because of the personal sympathy of the Green Minister for the Environment, the persistence of activists in occupying the site for more than a year and the positive image of the activists presented in the mainstream press. ICTs facilitate activists to have an independent voice and to organise themselves very fast and to link their struggle to similar struggles world-wide. But much more is needed to make an action successful, the action and its aims have to reach the public- as well as political agenda. The role of the mainstream press in amplifying the action and its aims is crucial in this regard! Sympathy and support from the local population for the action also plays an important role in the perception of the activists and their aims. Finally, the case of the Lappersfort-forest also shows that vested interests are difficult to beat, even if the press, a minister and the local population supports your aims.

Most Important Conclusions

Many social movement organisations operating at the transnational level show much resemblance to the characteristics of the new social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. The strength lies in their ability to link the local to the global and vice-versa, raising awareness at the local level of the impact of the global, but also raising awareness at the global level of the existence of the local.

The Internet is an opportunity structure; they represent for social movements a (cost-) efficient tool to organise transnationally and decentralised, to mobilise beyond its constituency, to network with other organisations and/or to inform independently. The Internet also provides the backbone by which direct action can be organised in a decentralised way. Another interesting “new” feature of the Internet is its interactive

potentials. The Internet facilitates interactive debate, which can be linked to a strengthening and/or broadening of the public sphere. As our empirical analysis pointed out there are major constraints in this regard.

The results of this research show that both techno-optimists, which see the Internet as a new Athenian forum, and techno-pessimists, which fear alienation and domination are wrong in that they both ignore one part of the equation. A more differentiated and shaded perspective is needed for an understanding of the impact of ICTs. This would be positioned between boom and doom, accepting both enabling and constraining factors, combining continuity with discontinuity, accepting the dangers of concentration and domination, but at the same time recognising that resistance movements are benefiting from the same technology. Technologies can strengthen existing hierarchical power structures as easily as they can subvert them.