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Activism in the Networked World

In civil society, do networked communications technologies increase our ability to act together for change?

Executive Summary

The Freedom of Expression Project

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Activism in the networked world: Executive summary

1. Introduction

Social activists now use new communications technologies to achieve results that were previously unthinkable. Yet the same tools have empowered anti-social groups such as terrorists and sex traffickers, and also many governing and corporate institutions. This paper looks at how these trends are affecting civil society, their implications, and what can be done to foster the networked environment as a space for positive collaboration. It aims to answer the question: *Does the networked communications environment increase our ability to act together for change, nationally and transnationally?*

2. Definitions and theoretical frameworks

This paper draws on these key concepts:

- Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) protects the right to freedom of expression. This includes all private communication between individuals and groups. It is a 'foundation right' that provides the basis for the protection of other rights and freedoms, including the right to freedom of peaceful association and assembly as set out in Article 20.
- 'Civil society' is an open political space in which associations of citizen and state actors debate and negotiate how society, politics and economics should be run and how resources should be distributed.
- Ideas of hegemony and counter-hegemony (defined by Gramsci) describe how dominant classes assert their power through cultural norms and institutions, and how subordinated classes can resist these by building alternatives.
- The 'public sphere' (defined by Habermas) is a communication network through which debate leads to the formation of public opinion, and civil society is an essential element of successful democratic systems.
- Models of civil society must also take into account 'uncivil' groups such as terrorists and violent activists, which engage in political negotiation not for progressive causes or using peaceful means.

3. How do people act together for change in civil society?

We need to consider a range of issues in examining the impact of networked communications technologies on civil society. These include:

- organisations' forms. These can be categorised, for example, in a spectrum that ranges from centralised, hierarchical and formal organisations to decentralised and informal movements
- organisations' recruitment methods, both formal or informal
- the political and economic conditions that favour or catalyse social activism
- the discourses and narratives that activists and their opponents use to frame and describe their activities.

4. How are civil society organisations using networked communications?

Communications technologies offer new opportunities for organisations to collaborate, to publish information, to mobilise supporters, and to monitor governments. However, research suggests that many are failing to make full use of new technologies' strategic potential.

4.1 Civil society organisations must learn to appropriate new technologies to help them overcome barriers to their success. These barriers include, for example, being insufficiently representative, having unclear governance arrangements, or using poor quality evidence in lobbying. Information and communications technologies can help to address these barriers, effectively acting as a 'master key' to greater effectiveness.

4.2 A growing number of studies are analysing relationships between individuals and organisations in transnational social networks, and are finding that civil society as a whole is poorly interconnected. There is a small core of well-connected organisations that are usually from more developed nations and have broader objectives than other organisations. Communications technologies may reinforce patterns of inclusion and exclusion, as better-resourced organisations are more likely to have access to them.

4.3 Civil society groups are gaining influence in national and international policy arenas. However, they do not straightforwardly represent the general public, and do not all have equal opportunity to influence the 'civil society position'. Technology is a tool for collaboration rather than a panacea; changes may also be needed in organisations' social relationships.

5. The bigger picture: Networked activism in a networked world

There is increasing acceptance of the idea that networks are the most effective organisational structure for civil society actors to achieve their goals, and there is evidence that networked forms of activism are increasing.

5.1 The processes of globalisation are restructuring politics, society and economics, and flexible networks of capital and information have become the basis of the new global order. Networked communications technologies are bound up with and support this change. There is evidence that networked 'counter-power' movements are now emerging, while the internet also offers civil society new opportunities to nurture a democratic networked public sphere.

5.2 The processes by which people form identities and culture are also changing in the environment of networked communications, which provides more viewpoints and more choice of social networks. These processes are increasingly understood as an important part of people's motivation to act in civil society. However, contemporary civil society activism is also rooted in the realities of economic and political change.

6. How does networked activism achieve change?

Civil society activism is increasingly occurring through networked movements that are composed of diverse groups and with multiple centres of influence. These are adaptable, often innovative and more structurally resilient than centralised organisations.

6.1 Networked movements derive strength from their numbers, diversity and decentralised nature, but have been less effective at putting forward specific demands and proposed policy changes.

6.2 Networked technologies are playing an important role in mobilising activists, both in democratic and authoritarian countries, as many examples illustrate. They have made communication more efficient and opened it up so that a wider range of people can participate. Mobile phones are particularly useful given their near ubiquity in many countries, and also where levels of internet access and literacy are low. Other factors also determine whether mobilising efforts are successful: for example, debates in the media, events designed to incite emotions, and the spontaneity of campaigns.

7. Reconciling tensions: creating new models of working

Analysis of civil society and social movements highlights two key tensions. The first is between those who emphasise 'active agents' as drivers of change and those who emphasise the importance of structural processes. Both are important: individuals and agencies operate within a 'structural scaffolding' of political, economic, cultural and social factors.

The second tension is between informal, decentralised movements and formal, centralised organisations. There is a growth in the number of decentralised activist networks, yet large parts of these networks are made up of centralised organisations. Hierarchical power structures exist within networks themselves, and arguably these are necessary to advocate successfully for policy change.

Civil society needs to find ways to move beyond these tensions and balance these dynamics to create effective and democratic activism. Centralised activism may help to counter some of the weaknesses of decentralised movements; centralised organisations may in turn benefit from greater flexibility, inclusiveness and deliberative democracy. Efforts to create new opportunities need to be encouraged and supported, and networked communications have an important role to play.

8. Threats and challenges to networked social activism

8.1 An analysis of civil society must also consider 'subversive' groups such as terrorists, sex traffickers and fascist organisations. Terrorists have creatively used the potential of networked communications, and 'cyber-terrorists' have targeted modern information systems. However there is as yet a lack of evidence about the success of terrorists' mobilisation efforts or about the relationship between the use of networked technologies and the number of terrorist attacks. It is important not to overestimate the significance of technology as an actor in its own right: a wide range of other factors influence the relationship between subversive groups and networked communications technologies.

Networked communications are presenting regressive groups with new opportunities; progressive groups urgently need to work to appropriate new technologies for positive social change.

8.2 In response to the 'war on terror' in 2001, many countries have passed legislation that gives governments more power to monitor and act on internet communications. Online freedoms are also threatened by other 'uncivil' behaviours including the posting of violent or racist material on video-sharing sites.

Some authoritarian governments have taken extensive steps to filter internet content, block sites, monitor activity and arrest the originators of 'subversive' content. In democratic countries, many examples show that corporate control of the communications environment also poses a range of threats to freedom of expression, for example through making access to the internet less affordable for civil society groups.

9) Conclusions: How can we foster the communications environment as a space for positive social collaboration?

Funders and supporters can play an important role in developing civil society's knowledge and capacity to make and influence policy. Examples of support could include:

Helping civil society actors to work more democratically and effectively through

- Promote research and dialogue about what a democratic, inclusive and effective civil society would look like, and how communications technologies can help to build it.
- Promote research and awareness-raising about the benefits and limits of new multi-stakeholder policy processes.
- Support organisations working to harness communications technology for social good and connect with wider civil society groups.
- Promote research into the constraints that prevent civil society groups from appropriating communications technologies.
- Facilitate civil society networking in national, regional and international policy arenas.

Maintaining an open networked environment and guarding the opportunities it holds for enhanced collaboration

- Break down the divides between human rights, social tech, media justice and academic civil society groups through increased networking, with the objective of fostering effective advocacy in national, regional and international communications policy arenas.
- Encourage their productive engagement with policy processes about the relationship of communications with security, hate and violence.
- Strategically support alternative media initiatives to give the progressive public a voice in mainstream discourse.