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# **Activism in the Networked World**

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

*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.

## Activism in the networked world

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

### 1) Introduction

Networked technologies are empowering both social and anti-social groups alike. Social activists – local and global – now use websites, e-mails and mobile phones to share information, mobilise and achieve results that were inconceivable before the advent of the new technologies. Yet the same tools also enable anti-social groups such as terrorists and sex traffickers to communicate and collaborate more effectively. They have also given more power to the governing and corporate institutions with which activist groups are negotiating.

This paper looks at how these trends are affecting civil society. What are their implications? What can be done to foster the networked environment as a space of collaboration for positive rather than negative ends?

After setting out a definition of civil society as a political space in which citizen and state actors negotiate norms and policy, the paper moves on to examine how civil society actors are using networked communications technologies. Following Castells' analysis of the network society, it explores how structural processes are affecting opportunities for activism and are fostering decentralised and networked forms of organisation. The paper argues that civil society actors need to reconcile tensions between decentralised and centralised activism: informal, dispersed movements derive strength from their diversity and spontaneity, but central organisation is necessary to advocate successfully for specific policy change. Networked communications technologies have the potential to help civil society actors overcome these tensions, but only if they are actively appropriated and adapted to meet this need. Effort is also needed to guard online spaces for activism which are threatened by corporate takeover and government control in the name of increased security. Considerable energy, dedication and resources are needed to achieve these objectives, but, if successful, the benefits for progressive civil society in terms of increased inclusion and effectiveness would be substantial.

### 2) Definitions and theoretical frameworks

This paper is part of the Freedom of Expression Project, which aims to explore the challenges and opportunities for freedom of expression in the networked communications environment. It focuses on one of the Project's four key questions: ***Does the networked communications environment increase our ability to act together for change, nationally and transnationally?***

Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

The right to freedom of expression is a foundation right in society: it 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. Freedom of expression is required for the formation of associations and the activities that occur within them, all of which depend on communication. The rights to freedom of association and freedom of expression are closely related and often mutually reinforcing. The exercise of the right to freedom of association can strengthen the right to freedom of expression, for example through campaigns for freedom of information, for the release of political prisoners or for democracy.

## **2.1 Models of civil society**

This paper focuses on assemblies or associations in civil society in which people work together for positive<sup>1</sup> social change, outside formal democratic mechanisms such as voting.

Concepts and definitions of ‘civil society’ are widely contested. This paper conceives of civil society as an open, fluid political space in which citizen and state<sup>2</sup> actors debate and negotiate how society, politics and economics should be run and how resources should be distributed. It draws on Gramscian ideas of hegemony and counter-hegemony to discuss the processes of negotiation that occur when civil society actors directly challenge the state. Gramsci conceived of civil society as made up of cultural institutions such as churches, schools and other social associations. According to him, it is through these institutions that the dominant classes assert their power or hegemony over the working classes, disseminating doctrine and building the cultural norms required to maintain social order. Once the subordinated classes understand how hegemony is being asserted, they can then engage in a ‘war of position’, by taking over cultural institutions or building new ones and resisting the dominant ideology (Gramsci, 2000). Latin American and Eastern European scholars and activists drew on these theories in their movements for democracy in the 1970s and 1980s. Once political and economic ground had been won back from authoritarian states by activists, civil society was seen as a space that was to ‘be kept open and alive as a necessary complement to a healthy democracy, an antidote to narrow party politics and a bulwark against future threats to democracy’ (Anheier et al, 2001:14).

This paper also draws on Habermas’ model of civil society as ‘the public sphere’, to help understand and discuss the dynamics in social democracies where civil society actors work with governing institutions, rather than directly against them. Within the public sphere, civil society actors engage in public debate and discussion, aiming to shape public

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<sup>1</sup> The use of ‘positive’ here is intentionally and necessarily broad, as understandings of ‘positive change’ will vary widely between different communities. In this paper, ‘positive’ refers to liberal ideas of political and social freedom, social justice and equality.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Citizen’ and ‘state’ are used here as a proxy for ‘governed’ and ‘governors’, or those with relatively less power and those with relatively more. Traditional concepts of state and citizen are not always relevant, as many migrants and other excluded groups can be denied citizenship where they reside. People are also ‘governed’ or affected by institutions outside the state, at regional and global level.

opinion. In this model, civil society is an essential element of successful democratic systems; its actors aim to influence governments rather than capture them and overhaul their institutions (Friedman, 2004).

It should be recognised, however, that groups engaged in political negotiation or public debate are not always working for progressive causes or using peaceful means. Models of civil society must also take into account 'uncivil' groups such as terrorists, violent activists and fascists. Both 'progressive' and 'regressive' elements of society challenge norms and aim to change social policy and practice and/or existing power structures according to their values and beliefs. Civil society is diverse and heterogeneous, with complex inter-relationships between its actors and institutions at local, regional and global scales.

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

For the purposes of discussion and empirical analysis, civil society activists can be categorised in different ways. This paper groups them broadly according to their organisational forms, all of which can be local, national or international in scale. These are:

- **Non Governmental Organisations and Community Based Organisations** (NGOs & CBOs) - private, voluntary non-profit groups. E.g. Amnesty International, ETA (the Basque Homeland and Freedom organisation).
- **Advocacy or policy networks** – loosely affiliated and often informal configurations of actors, sometimes linked across issue and territorial boundaries, bound together by shared values and dense exchanges of information. E.g. International Freedom of Expression Exchange, Blood and Honour (the international neo-Nazi network).
- **Coalition groups** - more coordinated collaborations than advocacy networks, which campaign using coordinated shared strategies. E.g. The International Network on Small Arms, al Qaeda.
- **Social movements** - more spontaneous, fluid and diverse networks of actors with common purposes and solidarities linked across territorial boundaries. They have the capacity to generate coordinated and sustained social mobilisation publicly to influence social change, usually through protest and disruptive action. E.g. World Trade Organisation Seattle protests, Danish cartoon protests.

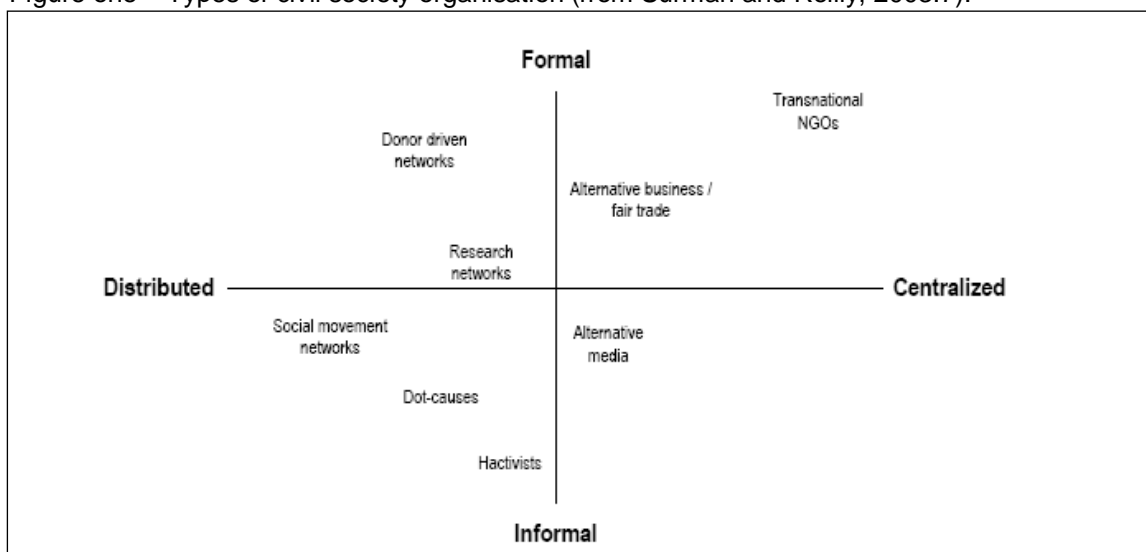
(Based on Khagram et al, 2002.)

Surman and Reilly (2003) suggest thinking of the organisation of civil society activists in terms of a spectrum that ranges from centralised, hierarchical and formal organisations to decentralised and informal movements (Figure One). Drawing on earlier work by McAdam, Garrett (2006) classes organisational form as one of the 'mobilising structures' of civil society activism. Mobilising structures are the factors that determine whether, and how, large numbers of people are likely to engage in active protest about a particular cause. As well as organisational form, these include the ways in which organisations recruit others to their cause (from informal friendship networks to formal recruitment methods).

In considering the impact of technology on civil society, it is important also to consider 'opportunity structures' and 'framing processes' (Garrett, 2006). Opportunity structures are the conditions that favour civil society activism, for example the institutionalisation of the rights to freedom of expression and assembly or the state's capacity for repression.

Framing processes are the discourses and narratives that activists or protesters can use. For example, al Qaeda frame their actions as ‘jihad’, whilst others use the term ‘terrorism’. The protests against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle in 1999 were called ‘anti-globalisation’ protests by the mainstream media; the activists themselves used the more positive term ‘social justice’ (Castells, 2003).

Figure one – Types of civil society organisation (from Surman and Reilly, 2003:7).



These frameworks can help us to examine how the rise of networked communications technologies has affected civil society activism. For example, how are technologies being used by groups with different organisational forms? How do technologies affect political and economic processes and in turn the opportunities for activism? Do they give certain groups more influence in setting discourses and narratives, in turn impacting on the norms and informal institutions that govern society? The rest of this paper tackles these questions.

#### 4) How are civil society organisations using networked communications?

Surman and Reilly (2003) identify four main areas of activity in which communications technologies are helping transnational<sup>3</sup> activist organisations:

- **Collaboration.** Communications tools such as e-mail, forums and wikis<sup>4</sup> make it easier for groups in different locations to work together – for example on coordinated campaigns, co-authored reports or press statements.

<sup>3</sup> Whilst Surman and Reilly focus on transnational movements their arguments are also relevant for local and national activism.

<sup>4</sup> Wikis are online applications that allow users collaboratively author documents through editing and online discussion. Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>), the free collaborative encyclopaedia, is the best-known example of a wiki.

- **Publishing.** Communications media such as the internet and community radio reduce the costs of disseminating information and give groups access to new audiences.
- **Mobilisation.** E-mail, mobile phones and websites make it easier for organisations to recruit and keep in contact with supporters. This includes both financial supporters and active campaigners in activities such as street protests or e-mail campaigns.
- **Observation.** The internet opens up information to civil society organisations, enabling them to reduce the costs of research, increase its quality and more effectively monitor the actions of governments and other institutions.

Box One outlines some of the ways that national and international labour movements are using new communications technologies.

### **Box One: Networked labour movements**

*“For too long unions all over the world have been on the ropes. Now we’re on the Net and it’s already beginning to pay off” Steve Davies, founder of Cyber Picket Line<sup>5</sup> site.*

Whilst direct strikes and picket lines will continue to be important modes of protest, unions across the world are now making use of networked technologies to increase the effectiveness of their work:

**Collaboration:** Global union federations use e-mail to maintain links between their members across the world. Members of coalition groups rely on networked communications to plan and implement international campaigns – for example the Clean Clothes Campaign, a European international campaign for improved conditions for garment workers.

**Publishing:** Many unions use websites to make documents publicly available, for example the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Other union network sites encourage members to be volunteer correspondents and send news stories into the central site, for example LabourStart.

**Mobilisation:** Union sites encourage visitors to get involved in direct action campaigns. To give two examples: the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions site has a downloadable letter for visitors to use to protest about state repression; the LabourStart site showcases union campaigns around the world..

**Observation:** Labour union news sites allow unions across the world to keep up to date with developments in other countries. The internet gives them access to a wealth of information to inform their campaigns and increase their bargaining power. This includes legislation published on government sites and a wide range of resources available on the International Labour Organisation website.

Information from Lewis (2006:162-167)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/union/>

The extent to which civil society organisations have taken up these new opportunities varies significantly. Surman and Reilly (2003) find that most transnational organisations are failing to make strategic use of new technologies, limiting themselves to uni-directional publishing on websites, online fundraising and online petitions. This is true of the labour movement as outlined in Box One. The potential of networked technologies goes beyond these uses. Collaborative tools like wikis give civil society organisations new opportunities to democratise themselves, by opening up the process of drafting policy statements to other organisations or even to the general public. Most, however, have failed to move beyond 'web 1.0'<sup>6</sup> to harness the new possibilities offered by 'web 2.0'.

Other studies and surveys support these findings. For example, a survey in the USA of nearly 400 social change organisations found that 95% believe technology is essential for achieving their mission, but 59% admit they are struggling to use technologies effectively (Dederich et al, 2006). Worryingly, many organisations are still failing to use older technologies: 39% of respondent organisations do not use e-mail newsletters and 47% do not accept online donations. Levels of understanding of newer technologies, and interest in them, are low. 45% admit that they don't understand public wikis, 46% explicitly express no interest in social networking<sup>7</sup> and 55% express no interest in text messaging (ibid). The major barriers to better use of communications technologies include a lack of time, expertise and financial resources (Dederich et al, 2006; Henderson, 2006).

There are some more positive findings. An investigation into the use of 'web 2.0' technologies by human rights grantees of the Overbrook Foundation in the USA found that half the groups have blogs on their websites. However, only half of these allow user comments (Fine, 2007). A major reason for this is a reluctance to push power to the edges of organisations. Most organisations consider it important to retain control over messaging during campaigns and many worry that opening up discourse to other groups and members of the public might undermine their work (Fine, 2007).

#### **4.1 How communications technologies could strengthen civil society networks**

The evidence suggests that many civil society groups are failing to harness the opportunities that new communications technologies offer. Making better use of technology would be an important first step, but it would not be enough. Civil society organisations need to go beyond simply *using* communications technologies and instead *appropriate* them. They need to identify their own weaknesses and needs and actively adopt and shape the communications tools available in order to address them (Surman and Reilly, 2003). Surman and Reilly provide case studies of a number of organisations

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<sup>6</sup> 'Web 1.0' generally refers to 'first generation' internet activities such as e-mail and static web pages. 'Web 2.0' is widely used to refer to newer, more participatory internet tools such as blogs, social networking sites and wikis which allow for more user interaction than was previously possible on the internet.

<sup>7</sup> Campaigns using the MySpace networking site by Oxfam (Oxjam) and Amnesty International (Make Some Noise) demonstrate the value that online networking tools can have for the voluntary sector, particularly in helping them reach out to younger people. Other organisations, like the Genocide Intervention Network, attribute their success to reaching out through MySpace, Facebook and Flickr (see McQuillan, 2007).

who have attempted to do this, and an example from Friends of the Earth is outlined in Box Two.

So what are the main obstacles and weaknesses and how might communications technologies help tackle them? Perkin and Court (2005:iv) identify ten main 'keys to success' for civil society networks<sup>8</sup> trying to influence policy processes.

- **Clear internal governance agreements** – clear processes improve legitimacy and efficiency, and reduce conflict – e.g. processes on how objectives are set, membership is defined and decisions are made.
- **Strength in numbers** – larger networks have greater political weight.
- **Representativeness** – if networks are representative of the public they speak for, they have more legitimacy and therefore more influence.
- **Quality of evidence** – this affects credibility and legitimacy.
- **Packaging of evidence** – this improves communication and credibility.
- **Sustainability** – financial and organisational sustainability is necessary for exerting influence.
- **Key individuals** – respected or expert spokespeople increase influence.
- **Informal links** – links between activists and with the institutions they are targeting make advocacy more effective.
- **Complementing official structures** – networks should complement rather than duplicate institutions.
- **Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)** – these are increasingly vital for networking.

Perkin and Court suggest the use of communications technologies as one key to success. However, ICTs help groups to achieve some of the other keys to effective collaboration and can therefore act as a 'master key'. For example, communication by e-mail and text message makes it easier for groups to mobilise people for campaigning and gain 'strength in numbers'. The proliferation of information available via the internet offers groups new possibilities for increasing the quality of evidence they gather, and advances in computer software enable groups to package this evidence clearly and professionally.

## 4.2 Improving network representation

As already stressed, too few organisations are making enough of the opportunities that new technologies present for achieving these keys to successful campaigning and advocacy. The issue of how representative civil society networks are of wider society is one area where this rings true. A small but growing number of studies are using network analysis to tease out the relationships between individuals and organisations in transnational social movements and networks, in order to see how representative they are of global civil society. For example, Anheier and Katz (2004) analysed NGO participation in self-organised events during the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai. They concluded that global civil society as a whole is poorly interconnected, as NGOs at the forum were organised into fragmented issue networks with relatively few

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<sup>8</sup> Perkin and Court focus on networks, but these keys to success are also relevant for individual civil society organisations and collaboration groups.

## **Box Two**

### **Appropriating networked technologies for collaboration: Friends of the Earth International**

Friends of the Earth International is a network of over 60 environmental groups, around half of which are based in the global south. The network is committed to democratic decision making in its campaign planning and implementation. It aims to make decisions by consensus and where necessary by voting. Before 2002, most of this occurred via e-mail in between group meetings, but this was proving difficult owing to the sheer volume of communications and the inadequacies of e-mail in fostering group discussion.

In 2002 the network started to develop an intranet platform to help its work. It included a facility for people to discuss and edit documents (as they would if they were working face to face), a document repository and tools for developing and implementing campaigns. Friends of the Earth International made efforts to develop a system that was driven by users' needs and working cultures, rather than imposing new technology systems upon them. The system used open and editable code, to ensure that it could be developed and adapted as new issues and needs arose.

Overall these efforts were successful, but the new system did encounter problems. Some of these were related to the technology, including users' perception that their productive inter-personal relationships were being replaced by computer-mediated and impersonal rationality. However, many of the problems were related to dynamics in the users' underlying social network. These included the difficulties of under-resourced groups in keeping up with workloads, and some groups' failure to adhere to agreements about how the system was to be used. This illustrates that introducing technology to a system cannot be expected fundamentally to alter social relationships, and that dynamics between a technology's users can affect its ability to improve working processes.

Information from Surman and Reilly (2003).

overlaps. However, they identified a small core of well-connected organisations, usually from more developed nations and with a wider mix of general objectives than most organisations. This suggests a global hierarchy of civil society organisations, with most connected to others only via larger, well-resourced organisations rather than via direct connections.

Mueller et al's (2007) study of the structure of civil society networks in the multi-stakeholder World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process presents similar results. At the international WSIS meeting in Tunisia, one individual working for the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) acted as a hub for the civil society network, having the most links with other actors and organisations. As Anheier and Katz noted, this centrality resulted largely from APC's concern with a broad range of issues. The study also finds that the WSIS network was Eurocentric, with 7 out of 10 of the most central actors based in Europe. Again, separations within the network between issue groups were pronounced, with few interconnections between groups concerned with human rights, internet governance and media activism. Looking at 'global civil society' as a whole, Katz and Anheier (2006) find that the EU and US account for 66% of all

organisations in the global network that is working on global governance issues<sup>9</sup>. Almost two out of every three links between organisations in the network involve an organisation in Belgium, the UK or the US. Organisations in developing countries tend to link into this central core, and only 3% of all links are between organisations in developing countries.

Communications technologies played a key role in facilitating collaboration between civil society groups in both the WSF and WSIS processes. A wider range of groups was able to participate, and more effectively, than would have been possible without the technologies. However, these studies show that more opportunities to collaborate, or to participate in forming policy, do not translate into equal representation or influence for all civil society organisations. In fact, the increasing use of communications technologies for networking and participation is reinforcing patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the structure of civil society. Better-resourced organisations are more likely to have access to communications technologies and therefore engage in effective networking, whilst poorly-resourced groups are left behind. The case study in Box Three highlights how 'digital divides' in people's access to technology can engineer 'elite civil society', particularly in developing countries (Mercer, 2004). Whilst increased access to communications technology by civil society groups in the global south is bringing many benefits, it is also creating new problems that need to be analysed, understood and tackled directly.

#### **4.3 Social relations and internal governance issues**

The issue of representation links to another of Perkin and Court's 'keys to success': clear governance agreements. Within national and international policy arenas, 'civil society' is gaining more influence through multi-stakeholder<sup>10</sup> participation initiatives, which have often come about largely as a result of advocacy work by civil society organisations themselves.

However, the concept of multi-stakeholderism is far from unproblematic. Civil society organisations do not straightforwardly represent the general public. Nor do all organisations have equal weight or equal opportunity to influence the 'civil society position', given the inequalities that exist in economic and political power and increasingly in technological capabilities. It can be difficult to achieve consensus within coalitions, let alone across 'civil society' as a whole, given the broad range of issue groups and political stances involved. These factors underline the need for clear agreements within networks of organisations, covering how objectives and membership structures are defined, how decisions are made and how conflicts are resolved (Perkin and Court, 2005). Without clear governance agreements, the conflicts and inefficiencies within offline networks will be reproduced in online networks. The power to make decisions will inevitably flow towards members that are larger, with more political clout, knowledge, capacity and resources. This could be particularly dangerous in new multi-stakeholder forums where governments and corporate bodies sometimes appear to be co-opting civil society and replacing notions of 'citizen interest' with 'consumer interest' (Livingstone et al, 2007).

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<sup>9</sup> Based on analysis of data from the Union of International Associations.

<sup>10</sup> 'Multi-stakeholder' refers to collaboration between government, private and civil society organisations.

### **Box Three: Engineering elite civil society in Tanzania**

In her study of the use of ICTs by civil society organisations in Arusha and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, Mercer (2004) challenges claims that communications technologies will give voice to the poor and encourage participation and information sharing.

Reasons for this include the following:

- In 2004, only 4% of NGOs in Tanzania had an e-mail address. 41% of these were located in Dar es Salaam and 24% were international NGOs.
- Access to ICTs and membership of networks reflects established disparities in resources and influence within civil society.
- In many connected NGOs, access is restricted to top management tiers due to working culture and the high costs of connection.
- When Tanzanian NGOs have websites, they tend to use them for one-way rather than interactive communications. Websites are platforms for advertising and fundraising from western organisations rather than sources of information and mobilisation for local people.
- Access costs are prohibitively high and restrict NGOs' use of the web for information-gathering in support of their activities.
- Many Tanzanian NGOs do not believe that web-based communications will become central to their work in the future, as there is a strong oral and face-to-face communications culture.

In spite of these limitations, there is a growing number of examples of successful networking between NGOs using ICTs in Tanzania. These include the Tenmet education network, 25% of whose members are contactable by e-mail. While the problems of restricted access may reduce in the future, this will not automatically eradicate entrenched hierarchies or change communications cultures. If civil society groups are to harness the opportunities offered by ICTs, these issues need to be addressed directly.

Information from Mercer (2004).

As Mueller et al (2007) stress in their case study of the WSIS process, issues of internal network governance need to be addressed to make the most of the multi-stakeholder spaces that civil society campaigns can carve out :

*“It is clear that at the global level ideals of ‘democratic’ communication – or democratic anything – are not very meaningful until and unless the advocates of democracy are able to propose and enact institutional mechanisms that can facilitate deliberation, aggregate preferences, formulate norms and rules, elect and depose legitimate representatives at a global level” (p293)<sup>11</sup>.*

Technology is a tool for successful collaboration rather than a panacea. Change may also be required in the social relationships between individuals and groups, including the fostering of trust, equality and shared understandings (Surman and Reilly, 2003). This was illustrated by the case study of Friends of the Earth in Box Two. Civil society

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<sup>11</sup> Analysis of the CRIS (Communications Rights in the Information Society) campaign in the WSIS process

organisations need commitment, time and resources if they are truly to harness the potential of new communications technologies, and the process is likely to involve much trial and error. However, the benefits could be substantial.

## **5) The bigger picture: Networked activism in a networked world**

Much of the literature on the use of new communications in civil society focuses on social movements, coalition groups and advocacy networks rather than on individual NGOs. There is increasing acceptance of the idea that networks are the most effective organisational structure for civil society actors to achieve their goals (Perkin and Court, 2005), and some evidence that networked structures are becoming more prevalent.

Anheir and Thurmudo (2002) use statistics from the Union of International Associations to calculate that, whilst traditional membership organisations are declining in relative terms, 'organisations of special form' are increasing. These include information networks, diaspora groups and 'quasi-organisations', as well as foundations and financial organisations. Anheir and Thurmudo also quote a 1997 study which found that the number of coalitions amongst international NGOs increased from 25% to 40% between 1973 and 1993. The implication is that centralised organisations are in decline and new organisational structures are evolving to replace them.

### **5.1 How the networked economy is shaping activism**

This is at least in part related to changes in the wider political economy. The inter-related processes of globalisation and the rise of neoliberalism and libertarian social ideology have fundamentally altered the way that society, economy and politics function. Social activism, an integral part of the socio-political economy, has therefore also changed. Manuel Castells offers a comprehensive empirical and theoretical analysis of these ongoing changes. In *The Information Age*, he describes how the organising logic of economics and society is no longer that of hierarchical and centralised organisations such as the nation state. The processes of globalisation are restructuring society towards transnational, horizontally organised political and economic networks. For example, national and global economies are increasingly dependent on international flows of capital rather than trade in manufactured goods, and physical goods are no longer produced in single centralised firms but, via outsourcing, by chains of specialist companies producing components in 'just in time' systems. Flexible networks of capital and information are the basis of the new global order.

Networked communications technologies are bound up with the rise of this 'network society', driving some of its structural changes and providing the technological basis for the new structure of economic, political and social life (Castells, 2001). Networked technologies support the new global media regime through which governments and businesses exercise political and economic power at national and international levels. Castells follows the Gramscian model of civil society, and asserts that in the absence of mature global institutions the global media are becoming increasingly important, as the means through which the global elite create and assert manufacture hegemony (Castells, 2007). Counter-hegemonic<sup>12</sup> movements may choose to reject the logic of the network

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<sup>12</sup> Notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony are useful as analytical tools, but they can lead to simplistic analysis. It is important not to neglect the complex multiple identities of actors within

society and retreat instead into centralised, hierarchical communities, as they have for example in nationalist and many religious fundamentalist movements. Alternatively they may choose to create new networks of resistance (Crozier, 2002; Castells, 2001). The most effective 'counter-power' movements are networked in form and have entered the arena of global communications to challenge prevailing norms and institutions, aided in particular by the internet. As Castells (2007:249-250) states:

*“The internet provides the essential platform for debate, [a] means of acting on people’s mind, and ultimately serves as their most potent political weapon”.*

This places social movements as acting in direct opposition to ruling institutions, following the Gramscian tradition of thought. However, relationships between civil society actors and governing institutions are not always antagonistic. Some social democratic governments and institutions are seeking to formalise negotiation between different actors within civil society, inviting them to participate in policy formation through multi-stakeholder processes (Livingstone et al, 2007; Mueller et al, 2007). According to Habermas’ model of the public sphere, people actively influence governing institutions through public debate – and here, communications media are a key tool for civil society actors. The internet has reinvigorated civil society and offered new opportunities to create and nurture a democratic networked public sphere, by increasing access to public debate and the inter-linkages between different actors (see Horner, 2007).

## **5.2 Activism and identity**

As economics and politics are increasingly networked at local and global levels, so are the processes through which people form their identities and culture. These processes are increasingly recognised as being of central importance in understanding how people are mobilised and motivated to act in civil society. ‘New social movement’ theories<sup>13</sup> provide a more nuanced insight into these processes than do the traditional Gramscian notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Individuals have multiple identities, elements of which can be mobilised at certain times by different discourses and events (Mouffe, 1998). Networked technologies are arguably fragmenting people’s identities still further, by exposing them to a wider array of discourses and information about political and cultural events across the world. Bennett (2003) argues that globalisation and the associated information revolution have reduced the importance of collective identities that were created by membership of centralised and hierarchical traditional organisations (schools, churches, trade unions etc). Increased access to information and ideas through the global media and networked communications has given rise to more individualised, autonomous identity formation processes. The result has been the rise of ‘lifestyle politics’ in which people are freer to choose their own individual beliefs and identities. Bennett states that

*“as collective identities expressed in ideologies become less useful in mediating and linking movement networks, individual activists are more able to identify with the experiences of ‘other’ classes, causes, cultures and places...The ease of identifying with distant and diverse partners in problem definition, solution, and*

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movements, processes of conflict and negotiation within networks themselves and the intersection of different networks owing to overlapping membership and allegiances.

<sup>13</sup> New social movement theory, advanced by theorists such as Habermas, Tourraine and Offe, suggests that since the 1960s social movements have been based more around identity and culture compared to previous class-based movements with material objectives.

*cosmopolitan community is the process that drives the process of individualization into new collective forms.”*

People can therefore engage as individuals with their own identities, in diverse, loosely-knit and overlapping networks - a phenomenon referred to as 'networked individualism' (Wellman et al, 2003). Social and cultural networks have always existed, but networked communications have allowed them to become the basis of much of social and community life in technologically-connected societies (ibid). The internet has played a threefold role in this process: As a component of globalisation it has helped to drive changes in the processes of identity formation<sup>14</sup>; it reflects the networked structure of modern society; it provides an ideal platform for the formation of networks based on identity.

Identity politics and battles for 'hearts and minds' are undoubtedly central in contemporary national and international politics. However, new social movement theory often places too much emphasis on identity and the construction of meaning. Many forms of civil society activism are inextricably bound up with the political economy as well as issues of identity, and the two are often interlinked. For example, the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle are often cited as an example of the power of overlapping identity networks, as they attracted protestors advocating for a range of different causes from across the globe. However, these different identity groups were linked by a common protest against the contradictions and problems they perceived in the neoliberal economic order. These included contradictions between national democracy and transnational capital, the increasing financial and employment insecurity of the global workforce and growing levels of inequality at national and global scales (Gill, 2000). The result has been the formation of "a new set of democratic identities that are global, but based on diversity and rooted in local conditions, problems and opportunities" (ibid, p140). Contemporary civil society activism is thus not only based around identity politics, but is also often rooted in the realities of economic and political change.

## **6) How does networked activism achieve change?**

As discussed above, civil society activism is increasingly occurring through networks, at least in part because the formal institutions and bases of economic and political power with which they are negotiating are also increasingly networked. Arquilla's and Ronfeldt's concept of 'netwar' is useful for considering how these negotiations and struggles are occurring. They define netwar as

*“an emerging mode of conflict (and crime) at societal levels, involving measures short of war, in which the protagonists use – indeed, depend on using – network forms of organisation, doctrine, strategy and communication. These protagonists generally consist of dispersed, often small groups who agree to communicate, coordinate and act in an internetted manner, often without a precise central*

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<sup>14</sup> Based on a study of internet use in Catalan society, Castells (2007:249) states that there is a positive, reinforcing relationship between individual autonomy and internet use: 'The more an individual has a programme of autonomy (personal, professional, socio-political, communicative), the more she uses the internet. And in a time sequence, the more he/she uses the internet, the more autonomous she become vis-à-vis societal rules and institutions'.

*leadership or headquarters. Decisionmaking may be deliberately decentralised and dispersed” (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1996:5).*

The concept of netwar draws on analysis by Gerlach and Hine of social movements in 1960s America (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001). This found that the most effective movements had a networked structure which made them more effective than centralised and bureaucratic organisations in challenging prevailing norms and institutions (Gerlach, 2001). The structure of these movements is referred to by the acronym SPIN as they are:

- **Segmentary:** “Composed of many diverse groups, which grow and die, divide and fuse, proliferate and contract”
- **Polycentric:** “Having multiple, often temporary, and sometimes competing leaders or centers of influence”.
- **Integrated and**
- **Networked:** “Forming a loose, reticulate, integrated network with multiple linkages through travellers, overlapping membership, joint activities, common reading matter, and shared ideals and opponents” (Gerlach, 2001:289-290).

As Gerlach (2001) states, this style of organisation supports rapid growth in the face of opposition and can adapt easily to changing conditions. As the networks are segmented and polycentric they are difficult for authorities to suppress: failure or destruction of one segment does not necessarily harm others. SPIN networks can penetrate into a variety of social niches and can flexibly allocate labour according to changing circumstances. They are also strong and innovative as competition between constituent groups leads to escalation of effort (ibid). SPIN networks were identified before the popularisation of the internet and mobile phones in the 1990s, and networked technologies have enabled them to become even more sustainable and effective (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001). As de Armond (2001:233) states,

*“Netwar is nothing new as a form of conflict. What is new is the richer informational environment, which makes the organization of civil (and uncivil) society into networks easier, less costly, and more efficient.”*

## **6.1 Strengths and weaknesses of networked movements**

The 1999 WTO protests in Seattle are perhaps the best known example of SPIN netwar. Box Four explores this in more detail, outlining the role played by new communications technologies. Radical critics Hardt and Negri (2001) have taken the notion of the effectiveness of fluid and decentralised networks one step further, arguing that the multifarious and uncoordinated actions of protestors have the potential to form the ‘multitude’, a force capable of challenging the dispersed power of transnational capital or what they call ‘Empire’. They argue that the effectiveness of new forms of resistance movements or social activism lies in their ability to mirror the power structures or institutions they are resisting. Hardt has made direct comparisons between the internet and the decentralised power structures of global capital (*The Observer* 15/07/01), arguing that as a decentralised network, the internet is an ideal platform and tool for social movements seeking to resist the decentralised power of global capital. Klein (2002) echoes this, stating that networked communications are shaping social movements in their own image. According to commentators arguing in this vein, the overall result is a “unity of

many determinations” (Starr, quoted in Curran, 2006), “beginning to form what Gramsci called ‘an organism, a complex element of society’ that is beginning to point towards the realisation of a ‘collective will’” (Gill, 2000:138); a network that is “united in what it opposes, and deliberately diverse in what it wants instead -- a politics of one no, many yeses” (Kingsnorth, 2004).

However, while SPIN movements derive strength from their spontaneity, diversity and decentralised nature, this also leaves them unable to articulate and advocate for specific policy objectives. Most are capable only of resisting and destabilising the status quo, with policy makers left unsure about their exact demands and which voices to listen to. In Seattle in 1999, the protests disrupted the WTO Ministerial meeting, but did not succeed in proposing a viable alternative mechanism for governing the global trade system, largely as a result of their decentralised form and diverse participants. This is a major weakness of the decentralised, informal movements that networked technologies are catalysing. Rather than simply clamouring for change, activists need to engage constructively with governing institutions to define and achieve progressive solutions. Overcoming this weakness is a major challenge for civil society actors working for social change, as discussed further in section seven.

## **6.2 Mobilising for protest: the interaction of online and offline factors**

Communications have always played a central role in social movements, and networked technologies have made mobilisation for popular protest easier: they have made communication more efficient and opened it up so that a wider range of people can contribute to it and access it. There are many examples:

- In the mid-1990s, the Mexican Zapatista movement used the internet to mobilise people around the world in support of their cause. This formed the world’s “first informational guerrilla movement”, putting pressure on the Mexican government to halt their violent attempts of suppression and arguably unleashing the “Zapatista effect” of increased international solidarity and networking via the internet for social causes (Castells, 2003:82; Cleaver, 1998).
- In 2001, the circulation of text messages via mobile phones calling people to protest on the streets of Manila resulted in the ousting of President Estrada.
- In 2002, mobilisation via the web and mobile phone swung polling in the South Korean elections in favour of the underdog presidential candidate Roh Moo-Hyun.
- In June 2003, text messages and e-mails encouraged workers to strike and businesses to close in Zimbabwe in a pro-democracy stay-away organised by the opposition party.
- In 2004, text messages were used to mobilise people to protest against the alleged manipulation of information by the ruling party following the tragic bombings in Madrid, eventually resulting in them being voted out of power.
- In the same year, text messages played a similar role in mobilising protestors during Ukraine’s Orange revolution (Castells et al, 2007; Lewis, 2006; Zuckerman, 2007).

**Box Four**  
**The Battle of Seattle as netwar**

*“Floating above the teargas was a pulsing infosphere of enormous bandwidth, reaching around the planet via the internet” (de Armond, 2001:211).*

In November 1999, protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organisation disrupted the Ministerial meeting and delayed the start of the next round of global trade talks. Their ability to do this was rooted in the Direct Action Network (DAN), a loose coalition of NGOs and advocacy networks intent on shutting down the WTO meeting. Before the protests, DAN activists organised themselves into ‘affinity groups’ responsible for blocking road junctions in Seattle to prevent government delegations from attending the meetings. They used ‘swarming tactics’ approaching the junctions simultaneously from all directions to prevent police from quelling the attacks. Subsequent waves of affinity groups followed, giving reinforcements to the first groups and replacing any members who were arrested.

A wide range of factors contributed to the power of the DAN. These included a flawed police strategy and mobilisation within civil society, before the event, by the ‘formal’ protest of the federation of American trade unions. However, the activists’ maintenance of communication networks and the absence of a central control centre were also vitally important factors.

DAN’s ‘official’ communication system had been shut down by police on the morning of the first day of the protests. It was soon replaced by an informal network of mobile phones, radios, lap tops and police scanners: affinity groups and individual activists could therefore update each other on the progress of the protest, make tactical manoeuvres and intercept police strategy. These communications networks fed off and into internet communications, providing global audiences with alternative, grassroots accounts of the protest. One of the lasting legacies of the Seattle protests is the internet-based Indymedia network of alternative news..

Information from de Armond (2001).

ICTs are thus playing an important role in mobilisation in both democratic and authoritarian countries. A further example comes from China, where text messages were central in encouraging people to join a successful campaign to block the building of a noxious chemical plant in Xiamen in May 2007. Live ‘SMScasts’ were also set up in which protestors sent text messages to bloggers to publish on the internet, giving a wider audience live and regular updates about the protest (BBC news 30/05/07; Global Voices 01/06/07). Mobile phones are particularly useful as tools for spontaneous mass mobilisation given their mobility and near ubiquity in many countries. Their mobilising power is particularly important in countries where levels of internet access and literacy are low. The terms ‘flashmobs’ and ‘smartmobs’ have been coined to describe new movements made up of connected and mobile activists (Rheingold, 2002).

Whilst technologies are revolutionising protest, it is important not to neglect the importance of other factors that determine whether mobilising efforts are successful and whether protests achieve their aims. For example, debates in traditional and alternative media as part of the ongoing underlying battle over information and ideas will affect people’s

propensity to protest. Events instigated to raise emotions, such as the bombings that preceded the protests in both the Philippines and Madrid, are often essential ingredients of mass mobilisation. Spontaneity and a lack of coordinated central planning are also often important, as demonstrated in the case of the Battle of Seattle. In the Manila and Madrid protests, text messages were powerful mobilisers because people received them from trusted friends and family (Castells et al, 2007). The protest grew as the messages were spontaneously forwarded on through social networks.

In contrast, 2004 protests against the National Republican Convention in New York were less successful, and mobilising text messages were then sent from an automated software system, which reduced their power (Castells et al, 2007). Automated messages sent from centralised systems are also liable to interception. The Iranian government, for example, is believed to have blocked text messages sent via online gateways in support of reformist candidates during the 2006 elections (Zuckerman, 2007). New communications technologies are playing an increasingly central role in most contemporary social movements, but this cannot be separated from wider political and media processes, pre-existing social networks and the face-to-face activism of party meetings and protest rallies (Lewis, 2006).

## **7) Reconciling tensions: creating new models of working**

The discussion so far has highlighted two main tensions that arise in the literature on civil society and social movements. The first is between analysts who emphasise the actions of people and organisations (agency) as a major driver of change, and those who emphasise instead the importance of structural processes in the wider political economy. Section four of this paper discussed mobilising processes: how civil society actors are using communications technologies to collaborate for change, focusing on the agency of individuals and organisations. Sections five and six focused on opportunity structures - the structural changes in the political economy that have affected the organisational forms and strategies of activism.

This tension between structure and agency is present in the social sciences in general (Karatzogianni, 2006). However, as social movement theorists from Habermas to Tilly stress, both are important. It is useful to conceive of the activities of individuals and organisations as operating within a 'structural scaffolding' of political, economic, cultural and social factors which influence how people act but are not necessarily the sole determinants (Adeney and Wyatt, 2004). As Marx said, men make their own history, but not under circumstances of their own choosing. Processes of globalisation and the rise of neoliberalism are undoubtedly affecting activism in civil society. However, it is also important to consider why some organisations and mobilisations are more effective than others when they are all operating within the same structural scaffolding.

The second tension, related to the first<sup>15</sup>, is the apparent contradiction between informal, decentralised movements and formal, centralised organisations. Both are important yet appear to be incompatible, pulling in opposite directions. Analysis of the global political economy suggests that social movement activities are being shaped by structural changes and are also responding to them. The overall result is the growth of decentralised and fluid activist networks and 'smartmobs' that mirror the contemporary economic and political structures they are negotiating with. However, if we return to an analysis of agency, we see that large parts of activist networks are made up of centralised NGOs rather than individuals acting alone. And of course hierarchical power structures exist within networks themselves, and arguably these are necessary to advocate successfully for specific policy changes. Upon closer analysis, all decentralised 'netwars' involve centralised institutions and organisations at some point in their trajectory from mobilisation to active protest. This is illustrated by the case study in Box Five.

Elements of both hierarchy and decentralisation are important for successful social activism. The task for actors within civil society is to devise new strategies to overcome the tensions between the two, using dynamics both of centralisation and decentralisation to foster effective and democratic social activism. 'Centralised' activism can help to counter some of the weaknesses of 'decentralised' movements, such as their inability to achieve specific objectives and lack of sustainability (Curran, 2006). Similarly, centralised organisations can learn some lessons from decentralised movements about the benefits of flexibility, inclusiveness and deliberative democracy (Karatzogianni, 2006). Civil society actors therefore need to achieve a delicate balance between formal organisation and autonomy (Tarrow, quoted in Karatogianni, 2006), for example by developing networks made up of "partly autonomous and contextually rooted local units linked by connective structures, and coordinated by formal organisations" (ibid, p91).

Networked communications technologies have a key role to play here. This paper has discussed the new opportunities they provide for networking, collaborative authoring and action. Online forums and wikis can enable disparate groups to engage in deliberative democracy to forge new network governance agreements and policy approaches. This type of planned collaboration can complement more informal and spontaneous actions, giving social movements more coherence and sustainability. To some extent, this balancing is already taking place. For example, within 'anti-globalisation' movements, decentralised, informal movements tackle decentralised and intangible processes of globalisation, whilst more formal campaigns and centralised organisations engage in specific advocacy work in national and international institutions. Exciting experiments in online and offline collaboration between government, private and civil society stakeholders are happening in the dynamic coalitions of the Internet Governance Forum<sup>16</sup>. These efforts need to be encouraged and supported.

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<sup>15</sup> Many analysts who emphasise the role of structural processes in social movements argue that decentralised organisational forms are replacing centralised forms, whilst those who emphasise agency tend to focus on hierarchical and centralised organisations. Analysts and activists also tend to interpret their impact and importance of centralisation and decentralisation according to their own democratic principles. Those who prefer models of deliberative democracy place their faith in informal social movements, while those who adhere to principles of representative democracy tend to favour centralised organisations and networks.

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.intgovforum.org/Dynamic%20Coalitions.php>

Surman and Reilly (2003b) map out a 'strategic uses spectrum' of communications technologies along two axes: the first ranging from 'distributed to centralised' and the second from 'formal to informal' (Figure Two). They find that informal, decentralised social movements use decentralised, informal communication platforms such as blogs and mailing lists. Centralised, formal NGOs rely more on centralised and formal platforms such as websites and online petitions. As access to communications technologies expand across the world, the challenge is to break down these boundaries, allowing all actors within civil society to design and use technologies in new and innovative ways. Of vital importance here is what Surman and Reilly (2003) refer to as the 'social tech movement'; the organisations such as open source and internet governance groups that are working specifically to achieve these objectives. Further links need to be made between these groups and groups in wider civil society to give them the impetus and know-how to appropriate technology for social change (ibid).

#### **Box Five**

#### **The role of centralised, formal institutions in decentralised, informal movements - an example from the Philippines**

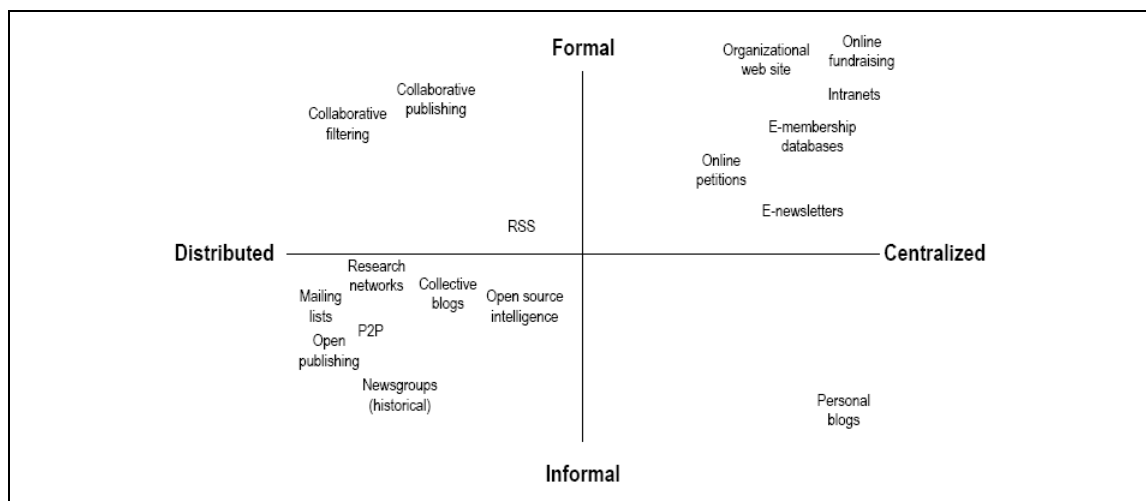
The ousting of President Estrada in the Philippines in January 2001 is widely cited as an example of how new technologies are fostering new spontaneous, mobile and powerful social movements that are capable of instigating political change.

The circulation of text messages mobilised thousands of people to protest on the streets of Manila over four days, culminating in Estrada being escorted from the presidential palace by the military. The 'smartmob' of protestors finally tipped the balance of power away from Estrada though discontent had been brewing at least since October 2000, when opposition politicians filed an impeachment complaint as a result of corruption allegations. Protest from within Estrada's political party came in the form of the resignation of senior officials. A formal impeachment trial began in the Senate in December 2000. The trial collapsed in January over disagreement about whether to accept a particular piece of evidence. Leaders in the Catholic church then played a role in giving legitimacy to the initial mobilising text messages, through broadcasts on the church-owned radio station.

Thus, political parties, state institutions, church institutions and the mainstream media played important roles in the processes leading up to the mass protest against Estrada: mobile phones came into play only at the tipping point of a wider political movement.

Information from Castells et al. (2007).

Figure Two – The strategic uses spectrum of use of communications technologies by civil society organisations (Surman and Reilly, 2003b:3)



## 8) Threats and challenges to networked social activism

### 8.1 Uncivil society online

The discussion so far has focussed on civil society efforts to implement 'positive' social change associated with human rights, social justice, democracy and peace. However, according to our definition of civil society, we must also consider 'uncivil' groups that contest prevailing norms and institutions with a view to advancing alternative, subversive values. Such groups include terrorists, sex traffickers and fascist organisations.

It is often argued that subversive groups are a driver of innovation in communications, largely because necessity is the mother of invention. For example, the pornography industry has been closely bound up with the development of new communications technologies. New communications offer both increased access to pornography and increased privacy ; a combination that has spurred many men to be early adopters and innovators, moving from photographs to videos to peer-to-peer file sharing (Lane, 2000; Coopersmith, 1999, 2006). The press often reports how online paedophile groups are harnessing opportunities presented by 'Web 2.0', including accessing images through peer-to-peer sites, spying on children via blogs and 'grooming' them in chat rooms and on social networking sites (BBC 26/01/05; Guardian 03/07/06).

Terrorist groups have also made creative use of networked communications. This has included encrypting sensitive information, and maintaining and mirroring websites on servers in countries outside the jurisdiction of countries in which they are banned (USA Today 02/05/01; Conway, 2003). The internet facilitates decentralised, anonymous and encrypted communication which is ideally suited to terrorist mobilisation, networking and planning. 'Netwar' in 'SPIN' structures is the ideal organisational form for terrorist activity (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001). The head of the private UK intelligence network Vigil has stated that "It is not a coincidence that the rise of the internet and al-Qaeda were simultaneous. The internet is al-Qaeda's oxygen." (quoted in the *Telegraph*, 24/06/07)

In addition, networked technologies present terrorists with a new front on which to attack the state, namely the information systems upon which modern society depends. Such activities are classed as 'cyber-terrorism'. Examples range from the Tamil Tigers' paralysis of Sri Lankan diplomatic missions by e-bombs<sup>17</sup> in 1996, to cyber warfare waged during the Kosovo war and between Israel and Palestine. However, such attacks have been relatively rare, perhaps surprisingly so. Terrorists have so far been unable to hack government sites to cause significant damage, and in fact 'hactivist' groups working for 'positive' social change have tended to wage more successful cyber-battles than terror groups (Reily, 2003; Denning, 2001). This could just be because the technologies involved are so new: they are currently used for simple research, organisational and discourse purposes but may be more fully appropriated for terrorist activity in the future as knowledge and capabilities increase (Zanini and Edwards, 2001). The recent breach of US, British and German government networks, allegedly by the Chinese military, could reflect worrying trends in this direction (*The Guardian*, 15/09/07).

Whilst the future is uncertain, terrorist organisations currently appear to be using the same centralised websites and mainstream e-mail systems as progressive NGOs. A proportion of this use is for 'wars of ideas' – the struggles discussed earlier over norms, institutions and framing processes in the era of globalisation. Terror organisations throughout history have relied on manipulating information, and networked communications offer more opportunities to do this. Most terrorist organisations maintain websites, and many are also engaging in mobilisation via internet chat rooms, message boards and virtual communities such as Second Life (Conway, 2003; the *Australian*, 31/07/07). There has been much speculation in the press, particularly in Britain, about whether this is 'radicalising' young Muslims, and a landmark case recently sentenced three British men to imprisonment for inciting terrorism on the web (Reuters, 05/07/07). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence to help determine how successful these mobilisation efforts are or whether the use of networked technologies has resulted in an increase or decrease in the number of terrorist attacks (Conway, 2003). On the whole, terrorism still relies on gaining the attention of the mainstream traditional media through large scale attacks, fostering fear amongst the general public (Reily, 2003). Face-to-face interaction also remains crucial for effective mobilisation and planning (Castells, 2001; Zanini and Edwards, 2001). Whilst networked technologies are undoubtedly facilitating terrorist networking, questions remain over the impact that this is actually having on terrorist activity.

As is the case with 'good' civil society organisations, more subversive groups' relationships with networked communications technologies are influenced by a wide range of political, economic and cultural factors. Technology itself is not a powerful actor but rather its power is determined by how it is used. It is therefore difficult to disentangle the effects on terrorist activity of access to communications technologies from the effects of wider national and global politics. This is also true for other 'subversive' activities. For example, the internet has made the work of sex traffickers more efficient, with the use of e-mail and websites for recruitment and coordination (Kee, 2006). New forms of trafficking have also been developed. For example, Japanese women have been taken to Hawaii to do live pornographic webcasts for Japanese audiences in order to circumvent restrictive pornography laws in Japan (Maltzahn, 2006). However, the roots of these crimes lie primarily in socio-cultural inequalities between women and men, and can only be tackled if these are addressed. Communications technologies can empower women through giving

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<sup>17</sup> The overloading and overwhelming of ICTs systems, for example by sending large volumes of e-mails or hits on a website.

them a stronger voice in society, but information technology systems are still primarily designed and maintained by men. Women need have more ownership in terms of access, development and control, 'taking back the tech'<sup>18</sup> to work towards gender equality (Kee, 2006).

Subversive groups on the web also experience tensions between the dynamics of centralisation and decentralisation. Whilst terrorist networks are reportedly thriving on the decentralised and anonymous internet, McAllister (2004) argues that this does not automatically make them more effective in achieving their ultimate aim of institutional change. According to SPIN theory, decentralised networks are effective and sustainable organisational forms, largely because if one branch of the network is attacked this will not destroy the organisation as a whole. However, centralised bureaucracies are the most efficient organisational structures for planning and management, and the dispersion of nodes in a network makes this type of coordination difficult. There are other problems with networked structures. Data gathering and invention has to occur at nodes throughout the network rather than diffusing down through a centralised hierarchy, and this risks wasting time and resources on duplication. The more numerous and dispersed the nodes in a network are, the more information flows between them, and the more likely it is that this information will be intercepted by the enemy.

Through its acts of mass, public terrorism and refusal to negotiate, Al Qaeda sparked the 'war on terror' and an all-out assault by the world's strongest military forces on all known physical bases of terrorist groups. Terrorist networks have therefore been forced to disperse, trading a loss of effective centralised planning and attack for increased structural resilience. As discussed in section seven, progressive groups could draw on the benefits of both decentralised networking and more centralised coordination. Progressive groups arguably have more ability to do this than regressive groups as, even in more authoritarian countries, they do not have to work as covertly.

To conclude, networked communications are presenting regressive groups with new opportunities to work towards their objectives and any discussion of freedom of expression online cannot ignore this significant threat. This adds greater urgency to the need for progressive groups to appropriate technologies for positive social change. If the free and open space that is currently enjoyed on the net is proven to aid 'villains' more than 'heroes', it is in danger of being reduced or even closed down in the interests of security. As the next section shows, this is already beginning to occur.

## **8.2 The 'big brother' state online and the corporate net**

The main threat that regressive groups in the networked world present for progressive civil society is an indirect one. Since the onset of the 'war on terror' in 2001, legislation has been passed across the world, in democratic and undemocratic countries alike, to give governments more power to monitor and act upon communications on the internet.

For example, legislation in the USA, UK, Switzerland, Belgium and Canada now requires Internet Service Providers to maintain records of internet use for certain periods of time and obliges them to disclose these if required for security investigations (Privacy

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<sup>18</sup> This is the aim of the 'take back the tech' campaign, organised by the Association of Progressive Communications, Women's Networking Support Programme (APC WNSP). See <http://www.takebackthetech.net/index.php>.

International, 2003). Many countries, including Australia and New Zealand, also require users to hand over encryption keys upon demand (ibid). Whilst these measures threaten rights to privacy, at present they should not encroach too much on progressive activism in democratic countries. However, there have recently also been restrictions on activism in the offline world in the name of security, such as attempts to ban protest in the UK's Parliament Square. This suggests that it cannot be taken for granted that governments will always respect the right to assembly and free association. Online freedoms are also under threat from other forms of uncivil behaviour, including the phenomenon of posting violent amateur videos on the internet, known as 'happy slapping'. It has sparked debates in the UK about whether video-sharing sites such as YouTube should be more closely regulated, and the online distribution of videos of racist violence and murder has raised similar questions in Russia and Belgium (BBC 29/08/07; Reuters 15/08/07; Cammaerts, 2007). The question of how best to deal with hate speech and incitement to violence online is serious and as yet unresolved, as is the debate over how to achieve a balance between security and privacy online. Progressive civil society needs to engage with these debates, both to help build a communications environment that advances freedom of expression and to guard online spaces of mobilisation and activism.

Nitin Desai, chair of the Internet Governance Forum, has commented that there tends to be a north-south divide in concern over internet issues. Groups in the 'global south' are generally concerned with increasing access and advancing cultural diversity, whilst those in the north are more concerned with online security (Desai, 2006). Other commentators have made similar observations, suggesting that people in developing countries are generally more optimistic about the empowering potential of the internet (see for example Rachman, 2007). It is important for all progressive civil society actors to both recognise the potentials of networked communications and actively work to protect and realise them, rather than slipping into blind optimism or self-fulfilling pessimism.

The challenges for progressive civil society in authoritarian countries are considerable. In many undemocratic regimes, the internet is a relatively open and free space compared to other media outlets - for example, an active blogosphere exists in Iran and China. Networked communications are playing a significant role in many acts of protest in authoritarian countries, with examples from China and Zimbabwe cited earlier in this paper. However, authoritarian governments have taken extensive steps to filter internet content, monitor subversive activity and arrest offenders, which have been well documented (see for example the Open Net Initiative and Reporters without Borders<sup>19</sup>). As more people gain access to networked technologies, relative online freedom could quickly diminish as governments perceive their power to be increasingly under threat. Stories of blogging platforms and video-sharing sites being blocked appear in the press nearly every week, from Turkey and Thailand to Egypt and Morocco (see Freedom of Expression Project democracy news archive<sup>20</sup>). Closed, heavily censored and monitored models of the internet clash head-on with traditional models of online freedom and openness. Opportunities for global civil society networking and activism online are under severe threat from authoritarian governments, and both progressive governments and progressive civil society have a role to play in fighting this threat in international policy arenas.

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.rsf.org> and <http://opennet.net/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.freedomofexpression.org.uk/resources/news+archive>

In democratic countries and at the global level, corporate control over networked communications could prove to be a bigger threat to civil society online than government control (Privacy International, 2003). This threat comes from different directions, affecting different levels, or layers, of the communications environment, from infrastructure to content<sup>21</sup>. For example, telecommunications companies in the USA are campaigning for the right to implement differential pricing for access and hosting on the internet. This could potentially undermine the ability of progressive groups to publish and access information online, through tipping the balance in favour of wealthy companies. Civil society groups in other regions should be vigilant in guarding against similar threats to access posed by proposals for differential pricing for access to new 'next generation networks' (see the net neutrality section [5.1] of Horner, 2007b).

At the connectivity and code layer, decisions about technical standards can have indirect but severe ramifications for civil society access to different communications platforms. For example, the Brazilian government chose a particular digital television standard which is expected to give even more political power to Globo, the monopoly media conglomerate, thereby reducing opportunities to build a democratic and inclusive media system (Moncau, 2007).

At the content layer, communications conglomerates are buying innovative networking mechanisms, from MySpace and YouTube to Skype, which poses the risk that their social and user-driven functions will be re-oriented towards profit-making opportunities.

In the infrastructure and applications layers, Western hardware companies have played a role in helping China to build its 'great firewall' of censorship and applications companies such as Yahoo and Google continue to play a role in maintaining it (Goldsmith and Wu, 2006). These serve as important reminders of the threat that a corporately-driven networked environment poses to the rights to freedom of expression and association.

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

This paper has highlighted the tremendous opportunities that developments in networked communications have given to groups working for positive social change. Many of these have already been realised. Instant, mobile communications allow for effective networking, wider participation, minority-controlled discourse can be challenged, and spontaneous mobilisation can take place within civil society. However, as Surman and Reilly (2003) stress, civil society groups need to appropriate communications technologies strategically in order to release their real potential. One of the most important challenges for civil society is to democratise itself so that all voices within the progressive public that it claims to represent can be heard, at local to international levels. Networked communications platforms and collaborative authoring applications offer significant opportunities here. Another important challenge for civil society actors is to address directly the tension between decentralising and centralising pressures on the organisational form that activism takes. Decentralised, informal and spontaneous protest is effective in many arenas, but

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<sup>21</sup> For more information about these different levels, and a full explanation of the 'layer model' of the communications environment, see the *Shaping the Networked World* paper (Horner, 2007b).

effective advocacy needs to be coordinated, sustainable and specific. Again, networked communications offer opportunities to address this tension. They allow networking and collaboration that can be used to build more representative networks and democratic internal governance agreements; they also make possible organisational forms that support both sustainable, effective advocacy and mobilisation for spontaneous, decentralised protest. However, concerted effort and creativity is required amongst civil society actors to harness new technologies in order to work towards these goals.

Progressive civil society organisations also need to be active in guarding the spaces for collaboration and networking that currently exist in the communications environment. Efforts by regressive groups to appropriate new technologies are prompting responses by government and a nervous public that threaten to close these spaces down. Vigilance is also required to prevent the further adoption of models emanating from authoritarian countries, of a networked environment that is closed, heavily censored and monitored. Responsible governments or regulatory bodies have an important role to play in recognising the fine line between restricting terror, violence and hate and suppressing new opportunities for positive social collaboration and change. Civil society organisations must actively address these issues, helping to propose solutions and regulatory frameworks. The dangers presented by corporate control of public spaces in the networked environment also need to be faced head on.

These challenges are huge, requiring understanding of the issues at stake and concerted effort to address them by civil society, government and corporate actors at local, national, regional and international levels. For funders, more specific actions that would start the ball rolling in this direction include<sup>22</sup>:

Helping civil society actors to work more democratically and effectively through:

- Further research and dialogue about what a democratic, inclusive and effective civil society would look like, and the role that communications technologies can play in helping to build it.
- Further research and awareness-raising amongst government, civil society groups and the private sector about the benefits and limits of new multi-stakeholder policy processes.
- Support for the ‘social-tech’ movement – those organisations that are working to harness communications technology for social good – and efforts to connect it with wider civil society groups.
- Further research into the constraints that prevent civil society groups from appropriating communications technologies.
- Facilitation of civil society networking, particularly in national, regional and international policy arenas.

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

- Breaking 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.

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<sup>22</sup> Readers should also refer to the recommendations made by Surman and Reilly (2003) with which the recommendations made here overlap.

- Encouraging their productive engagement with policy processes concerning the relationship of communications with security, hate and violence.
- Strategic support of alternative media initiatives to give the progressive public a voice in mainstream discourse.

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