

# Citizenship and New Technologies

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## BACKGROUND

Not long ago globalization had only one face, that of a restructured capitalist economy employing new information technologies to operate on a global scale (Castells, 2000). According to this interpretation of globalization, the global is represented as space dominated by the inexorable and homogenizing logic of global markets (Steger, 2002). In this neoliberal model, the market replaces the state and the individual, the community thus posing a bleak future for citizenship.

Today, however, this one-dimensional view of globalization no longer holds sway. Transnational protests over the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and the meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle are now seen as critical moments that speak to a new critical citizen activism that relies heavily upon new technologies and means of horizontal communication to operate on a global scale (Khagram, Riker & Sikkink, 2002; Ritchie, 2002). These means of communicating have provided an alternative voice and capacity to mobilize those excluded from an increasingly narrow spectrum of public discourse.

## INTRODUCTION

This article examines this other side of globalization, in particular, the development of new processes and means of communicating and organizing which have enabled new forms of expression and connection among citizens which are not easily controlled by states and ruling elites. It does so by using two case studies of the failed attempt to negotiate the MAI at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1995-1998 and the failed effort to launch a new round of trade negotiations at the WTO Ministerial meetings in Seattle in 1999. These are good cases since both were based on a set of core neoliberal values shared by state elites of the 29 OECD member countries and the dominant members of the WTO. Despite having virtually no access initially to mainstream media and limited resources, a broad coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were able to

challenge these elites and organize an effective opposition to the MAI and the Seattle meeting.

## GLOBALIZATION, NEW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES, AND GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

To understand how globalization might empower citizens, we must recognize that the information revolution made globalization possible. As Kobrin notes, "The emerging global world economy is electronic, integrated through information systems and technology rather than organizational hierarchies" (Kobrin, 1998, p. 362). However, while the information revolution breaks down hierarchies, it facilitates the creation of new power structures, redistributing not only economic, but also political power. Where economic globalization appears to be closing public spaces for state-centered citizenship, it may be opening them up elsewhere.

As a number of studies have indicated, information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially the Internet, have become important means of communication for many NGO networks (Warkentin, 2001; Smythe & Smith, 2003). Indeed, the Internet has been compared to the 'Swiss Army Knife' of political advocacy and organization (Hillwatch, 2001). This is because the Internet has become a multi-faceted tool providing civil society organizations with a number of advantages including:

- The facilitation of internal communication and provision of services to members—Strategy discussions and input of members at a distance are all made easier.
- The opening up of new public spaces for civil society organizations—The Internet can be used to educate the broader public about public policy and frame policy debates.
- The production, dissemination, and sharing of large amounts of information—Small, resource-poor organizations can, via the Internet, quickly and easily access research done by the organizations that do have these resources.

- The facilitation of public participation and mobilization—Thanks to the Internet civil society, organizations can quickly inform, organize, and mobilize their supporters.

The Internet thus possesses a variety of features that promote citizen engagement at a global level. The most frequently cited examples of how forces in civil and global civil society have combined to resist the traditional closed-door, top-down, multilateral processes are the MAI and the ministerial meeting in Seattle, and its failed attempt to launch the Millennium Round of trade negotiations (Ayres, 2003).

### WHY THE MAI AND SEATTLE CASES?

Why use these two campaigns to empirically examine the argument about globalization’s impact on citizens, democracy, and states? Primarily because many have argued that the root of the constraints states currently face in their capacity to make policy is globalization (McBride, 2003). The MAI, for example, was clearly designed and intended to limit state discretionary authority to discriminate between domestic and foreign investment in regulation.

Similarly, the expansion of areas of economic activity covered by trade rules have led to concerns that the WTO’s rules are severely constricting the scope of state policies in favor of markets and corporations. If ICTs have facilitated contestation of globalization, it should be most apparent in the case of organizations like the OECD and the WTO.

The methodology used in examining these cases involved a variety of tools, including the analysis of thousands of Web pages and sites, and detailed interviews with a number of the organizations most actively involved in the campaigns, including participant observation in Seattle with an accredited NGO, along with the standard review of primary and secondary sources available.

### THE MAI AND THE INTERNET

The MAI negotiations, formally launched in May, 1995 at the OECD Ministerial meeting, were drawn out over three-and-a-half years and ended in failure on December 2, 1998. While, at first, negotiations progressed rapidly in matters of general principles, they began to stumble in the winter of 1997 over the question of which economic sectors or state policies would be exempted from these general principles. Around the same time a draft of the February 1997 draft negotiating text was leaked and ended up very quickly on the Web sites of two public policy advocacy groups in North America. Once the text became known, public pressure—facilitated by the Internet—began to mount in a number of countries. In mid-October 1998, the French government, under pressure from the Green and Communists within its coalition, withdrew from the negotiations (Riché, 1998), thereby ending any real hope of agreement.

How important was the Internet in the politicization and mobilization against the MAI? To answer this question the authors began by surveying the presence on the Internet of MAI Web sites in February and March 1999, less than three months after the cessation of negotiations

*Table 1. Web sites by type of sponsoring organization*

Type of Group Sponsoring Site	Number of Sites	Per Cent of Total Sites
Public policy advocacy	53	15.1%
Political parties and MP sites	45	12.8
Media organizations	37	10.5
Government agencies—all levels	35	10
Individual/personal	30	8.5
Business organizations (including law offices)	26	7.4
Broad, anti-MAI coalitions	20	5.7
Environmental organizations	19	5.4
Trade unions	16	4.6
International organizations	17	4.8
Research institutes/centers	15	4.3
Student groups	9	2.6
Other (unable to classify)	9	2.6
Arts/cultural organizations	8	2.3
Church/religious	5	1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>352</b>	<b>100%</b>



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