

Chapter 16

Online Activism and Computer Mediated Communications

Stephen Fariñas

Florida International University, USA

ABSTRACT

The use of the internet by radical activists is a significant and growing aspect of e-activism, but has received little attention in the e-participation literature. This chapter aims to fill this gap by examining the use of computer mediated communications by radical groups in promoting their causes. The intrinsic nature of radical movements is such that their ideas cannot be disseminated through the mainstream media. Radical activists communicate through alternative media, of which internet has emerged as a significant source to mobilize as well as to disseminate. We focus on the internet use by two groups of radical activists: environmentalist and anti-globalisation groups. Since these groups have a radical agenda, they use the internet to circumvent government censorship. Beyond this, however, their uses of CMC are quite distinctive. Environmental activists were among the first to use the web as organizing and mobilizing tools. They promote their agenda through alternative forms of media which can easily be made available over the internet, e.g. magazines, booklets, flyers, leaflets, videos, and radio broadcast. Environmental activists also engage in several forms of cyberactivism, e.g. hacktivism. They actively participate in the e-rulemaking process by working to change policy. Anti-globalisation groups, on the other hand, primarily use independent media centers (Indymedia) to promote their cause. Independent media centers are versatile enough to be quickly established during a protest, allowing activists to mobilize interested parties quickly. Activists have also made effective use of e-mail listservs and the internet. However, anti-globalisation groups participate very little in the e-rulemaking process. Rather, these groups ultimately aim to do away with government control and corporate hegemony.

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INTRODUCTION

The internet is emerging as an important means of mobilizing social movements. The internet provides a democratic forum for different movements to reach the maximum number of people in the shortest amount of time. In other words, organizations are able to reach their targeted audience in an efficient a manner as possible. Space and time are no longer obstacles. Even censorship ceases to be a major threat. The internet is but one part of a large repertoire of tools available for activists to use to further their campaigns. All of these tools fall under the umbrella of information technology (IT) or information communications technology (ICT). This paper concentrates on the use of computer mediated communications (CMC). This subset of ICT deals exclusively with communications effected via computers.

Computer mediated communications allows users, who would not otherwise have an opportunity, to have a voice in the rule-making process. Some users may not have the time, access, or inclination to participate in more traditional forms of civic engagement. CMC levels the playing field. It makes the democratic process more democratic. This holds especially true for members of the radical environmental and anti-globalisation movements. Members of these two groups often shun participation in more conventional means of effecting change in government decision making. The “organization” of these groups is non-hierarchical. Although referred to as a movement, members generally participate autonomously or in small groups. Participation in large groups tends to be reserved for protests and/or demonstrations. Participation at an individual level (or in small groups) necessarily limits the amount of information gathered, as well as mitigates the effects of any particular course of action. Online activism balances the scales.

Unlike mainstream activists and groups who choose to work with government because they believe in its legitimacy, radical activists work

against government because they believe it to be illegitimate. CMC allows radical activists to remove themselves as much as possible from formal contact with government while still allowing the former to influence the latter. While not necessarily bringing about radical change, radical activists at least plant the seeds of thought/action to be later harvested by their mainstream counterparts (both those in and outside of government). Radicals serve as catalysts for political action—whether as movers and shakers themselves directly affecting government decision making or galvanizing more moderate activists to participate in e-democracy.

We have chosen to cover radical environmentalism and radical anti-globalisation separately for two reasons. First, their missions are unique. Although certain ideological aspects of each movement overlap (e.g. multi-national corporations adversely affecting the environment and society), each movement is distinctive enough to merit its own philosophy. Second, whereas radical environmentalists aim to change policy, radical anti-globalisation activists not only aim to change policy, they also aim to do away with government control and corporate hegemony. Both movements differ in their missions and their ultimate goals. However, they are both similar in their use of alternative media as an agent of social change. Through “engagement and organization of radical media” (Vatikiotis, 2005), participants have a direct, participative role in events as opposed to the passive one preferred by mainstream media.

The following sections will offer analyses into the use of the internet and other CMCs by the radical environmental and anti-globalisation movements and will show how these groups seek to stake their claim in the e-democracy landscape. Radical environmentalists are those activists who use tactics considered to be extreme in order to defend and protect what they see as a threatened environment. Tactics can include destruction of logging equipment, blocking logging roads by forming human chains, tree-sits, sabotaging con-

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