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Chapter 4

ICT-Usage Among Transnational Social Movements in the Networked Society: To Organise, to Mobilise and to Debate

Bart Cammaerts¹

Context

In recent years, the literature on the many usages of information and communication technologies (ICTs)² in everyday contexts has increased exponentially. The different perspectives in studies on ICT-use seem to suggest that this communicative technology permeates every aspect of everyday life. If this were the case, then it would be logical to suggest that – in addition to the socio-economical sphere – the cultural and the inter-personal, the political and the democratic systems are also being affected. There are of course many ways of looking at the usage of ICTs in political terms. An important distinction that emerges here is between the use of ICTs in more formal political processes and their use in more informal political processes. This case study looks at ICT-usage from the latter perspective and more specifically posed questions as to how (transnational) social movements appropriate and use these technologies for different purposes. It is, however, necessary to stress beforehand that although the use of ICTs was the starting-point of this case study, a technology-centred approach was rejected. It is too easy to herald the new potentials of the internet in democratic terms as revolutionary – able to change politics and the nature of political participation. We need to remain critical of unsubstantiated claims and assumptions that ICTs would (or have already) change our lives in a radical way – economically, socially, culturally and politically.

In many ways things have changed, of course, and ICTs enable or facilitate certain (political) processes, but these processes are very much embedded in an historical context, which is always a story of combined patterns of continuity and discontinuity. That is why this case study on ICT-usage by transnational social movements also needs to be linked to the existentialist crisis that faces (formal) representative democracy as well as to changing meanings of citizenship and to changes in participation.

Debates on the crisis of representative democracy usually refer to low voter turnout at elections, declining membership of political parties and old social movements, as well as an increasing number of protest voters. The crisis of representative democracy can also be explained against the backdrop of the partial withdrawal of the welfare state in many countries and long-term processes of globalisation and regionalisation,

which have undermined the sovereignty and power of the nation states (Rosenau, 1990; Hirst & Thomson, 1995; Held et al., 1999; Axtmann, 2001). It is possible to argue that this power-shift from the nation states towards regional/global political or economic institutions and the lack of or weak democratic control over these 'higher' levels of governance, has prompted civil society organisations – and more specifically social movement organisations – to organise themselves beyond the nation states in order to critically question the legitimacy and policies of international economic and political actors (Anheier, et.al, 2001; Florini, 2000; Guidry, et.al, 2000). Transnational civil organisations allow citizens to link up with a community of interest and action beyond their own nation state. As such, transnational civil society could be perceived as resulting from 'globalisation from below', an attempt to counter-balance the globalising economic, political and cultural spheres that increasingly escape the sovereignty of the nation states.

The citizenship notion has, of course, also evolved considerably since the Greek city-states or the formation and consolidation of the Westphalian nation states. Although citizenship is theoretically, but also empirically, still very much linked to and conceptualised within the 'boundaries' of the modernist nation state, the increased globalisation of the world economy; revolutionary innovations in communication, transport and mobility; ecological and demographic pressures; as well as ethnic and nationalistic forces have considerably undermined the sovereignty and legitimacy of that nation state, the core of the bounded notions of citizenship (Harvey, 1989; Lash & Urry, 1994; Held, et al., 1999). These social, economic and political transformations would suggest it is fair to conceive of citizenship as more complex and diverse than a classic understanding linked to rights and nationality. In political theory, this is exemplified by the emergence of several concepts of citizenship that could be called unbounded and go beyond the nation state (van Steenberg, 1994; Bauböck, 1994; Hauben, 1995; Linklater, 1999; Sassen, 2002). Examples of these are: ecological citizenship, net.citizenship, transnational citizenship, cosmopolitan citizenship or denationalised citizenship. Without going into the conceptual differences between these alternative notions of citizenship, they do have a commonality in that they point to the distinctiveness, but also – possibly conflictual – co-existence of, or even tensions between, on the one hand, the citizen as a legal subject, linked to welfare state rights, and on the other hand, the citizen as a normative subject, linked to social, sexual or cultural identities and action. Citizenship thus becomes, to use the words of political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1992, p.231), a 'form of identification, a type of political identity; something to be constructed, not empirically given'.

This approach suggests that the primacy of a liberal representative democracy that reduces political participation to voting in a political elite once every few years is no longer tenable. We need to develop new ways to enrich our democracy and complement representativeness with more participatory 'models of democracy', to use the title of David Held's (1987) famous book. Civil society – local as well as transnational – can play an important role in this process of increasing participation by acting as an interlocutor or mediator between citizens and state. When this is applied to the global or international level, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that civil society actors – as well as business actors for that matter – have manifested themselves increasingly as legitimate actors in processes of global governance.

However, this does not mean that the voice of civil society is being listened to (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2004). At the same time, the number of issues requiring global solutions has also increased and became more prominent on the political agendas of citizens, civil society organisations and (some) governments. Examples of such issues are: child labour, ecology, security, mobility, migration and human rights.

It is within this complex political context that the use of ICTs by transnational social movements should be situated. Studies of the different usages of interactive communication technologies by social movements have identified three main categories of use. Firstly, social movements use ICTs to organise themselves and to interact with their members, sympathisers and core staff. Secondly, use relates to mobilisation when ICTs are used to lobby within formal politics or to foster social change through online as well as *offline* direct actions. Thirdly, there is the potential of strengthening the public sphere through the mediation of political debate. Here the internet is considered by many scholars as a potential means to extend the working of transnational social movements geographically, to organise internationally, to build global or regional coalitions with like-minded organisations, to mobilise beyond their own constituencies, to spread information on a global scale independently and thereby support the development of global or transnational public spheres (Scott & Street, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001; Norris, 2002; Bennett, 2003; Kahn & Kellner, 2004).

Selection of Cases and Methodology

The selection of transnational social movement organisations for a more in-depth analysis of these different usages was based on a typology that distinguished between umbrella organisations, platform organisations, portal organisations and web organisations.³ This typology provides a useful tool for the selection of a diversity of cases that embody the multitude of issues raised by transnational civil society organisations, the variety of organisational structures and the different levels of governance they address (Dahlgren, 2000). It should, however, be noted that – like every typology – this typology is an ideal type. In reality, the different cases often perform different functions at the same time, such as platform, portal and web organisation. The problematic nature of typologies – as a construct – and the selection of only one case per type make it difficult to formulate generalisations about differentiated types of virtual organisations. Furthermore, the selection of the specific cases, although guided by the typology and with an eye on diversity and the transnational character of the organisation, is necessarily subjective. Despite these problems, four cases were selected.

WWW.APC.ORG (Umbrella)

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) functions as a network of networks and has been active since 1990. It can be regarded as a transnational non-profit umbrella organisation linking 24 national or regional computer networks and serving the needs of the social change sector. It was established to facilitate co-operation, information-sharing, and technical inter-operability among its members. APC not only promotes the development of non-commercial online spaces for and by

Table 4.1 Typology and Features of Selected Cases

Type	Characteristics	Selected Case	URL
Umbrella Organisation	Advocacy, representative, promoting use of ICTs, pooling expertise and resources.	APC	http://www.apc.org
Portal Organisation	Intermediary, sometimes with editors, mostly issue-oriented, directs towards others sites and organisations.	LabourStart	http://www.labourstart.org
Platform Organisation	platform for interaction, organisation and communication, interactive development of counter-discourses.	ATTAC	http://www.attac.org
Web Organisation	forums, mailing-lists, networking, mobilisation, virtual communities, alternative source of information.	Indymedia	http://www.indymedia.org

NGOs, but also lobbies for the inclusion of the information and communication needs of civil society in telecommunication, donor and investment policy.

WWW.ATTAC.ORG (Platform)

At first ATTAC – *Action pour une taxe Tobin d'aide aux citoyens* – pleaded for the introduction of a Tobin-tax to counter financial speculation and re-regulate the markets. But ATTAC also pursues the much broader goal of altering the dominant global neo-liberal economic framework. ATTAC could be described as a transnational coalition of local entities acting in accordance with a common agenda and developing alternative discourses. It has branches in 48 countries and has a web-presence in 33 countries. However, major differences exist between local branches with a result there are substantial differences in resources, volunteers and popular support. The transnational level serves more as a common frame of reference and less as an organisational structure.

WWW.LABOURSTART.ORG (Portal)

The LabourStart-page can be considered a very dynamic portal site dedicated to labour-related news and the international labour movement. It was originally developed by Eric Lee and is supported by Labour and Society International, an independent organisation that aims: 'to link the trade union movement with other parts of civil society and to help unions to develop a wider agenda'. The case of LabourStart indicates that the internet allows for widespread transnational activity with little or no resources. LabourStart, although based in London, is also transnationally organised. LabourStart exists in nine languages and is supplied with material by almost 150 correspondents located in some 30 countries. Correspondents also communicate with

each other through email and a mailing list. Overall, LabourStart can be considered to have a very strong transnational basis, given its presence on all continents and even more importantly and given the fact that it provides content in different languages.

WWW.INDYMEDIA.ORG (Web)

Indymedia is a worldwide network of independent media organisations through which several hundred dedicated journalists and activists cover grassroots activities and actions thereby explicitly distancing themselves from corporate interests. Although supported by organisations in civil society, Indymedia is largely a virtual platform bringing together both individuals (activists) and organisations. It uses new technologies to provide an alternative and organic public space that also functions as a space for steering and promoting civic action. Indymedia is active in over 40 countries and combines a global view with news on local action. Indymedia can be characterised as a transnational coalition of independent local initiatives with a common aim – to provide alternative news and support direct actions. The emphasis, however, is placed on the local organisation and on the reporting on local struggles, embedded in and/or linked to similar struggles at an international or regional level. As such, the geographical spread of Indymedia is rather strong, with a presence on all continents. The cultural spread, on the other hand, is moderate given that Indymedia is to some extent dominated by the Anglo-Saxon culture.

A diversity of methodologies was used to assess ICT-usage on the part of these transnational social movement organisations for organisation, mobilisation and debate. Table 4.2 provides an overview of the different methodologies.

This study examined organisational usage in terms of the degree and nature of transnationalisation within each organisation and the degree of online and *offline* interaction or virtualisation within each other organisation. The respective websites were analysed and a number of secondary sources relating to the different

Table 4.2 Overview of Methodologies

Methodologies	
1. Organisation	Analysis of web presence
Degree of transnationalisation	In-depth Interviews
Degree of <i>online</i> and/or <i>offline</i> presence	Documentary desk-study
2. Mobilisation	Analysis of web presence
Policy-influence vs political influence	In-depth interviews
On-line and <i>offline</i> mobilisation	Documentary desk-study
3. Debate	Content analysis of web-forums and discussion mailing list
Web-Forums of LabourStart/Indymedia and a mailing list of ATTAC	

organisations were studied. This was complemented by in-depth interviews with key persons from each organisation. Mobilisation was explored firstly in terms of the political strategy of each organisation and then in terms of specific instances of online and *offline* mobilisations with the aim of assessing the precise role of ICTs in mobilisation. The same methodologies as those used to analyse organisational usage were applied. Lastly, the usage of the internet to foster debate, was examined through an analysis of the web forums of LabourStart and Indymedia as well as a mailing list of ATTAC.⁴ Content analysis was used to get an idea of the variety of participants, the degree and nature of interactivity and the diversity of debated issues.

For a more in-depth overview of the research please consult the respective research-reports on which this chapter is based (Van Audenhove, et al., 2002; Cammaerts & Van Audenhove, 2003).

ICTs and Organisational Usage

The study posed two basic questions within the context of the organisational use of the internet by the different organisations selected. On the one hand, it was necessary to determine the nature and degree of transnationalisation of the different cases and to establish whether certain patterns emerge. On the other hand, there was the question as to whether this could be linked in some way to the degree and nature of interaction online versus *offline* of the different organisations.

Degree and Nature of Transnationalism

All the organisations can, of course, be defined as transnationally organised as they were selected on this basis. The results of the analyses, however, show that a distinction can be made between APC or LabourStart and ATTAC or Indymedia. APC and LabourStart, unlike ATTAC and Indymedia, do not have locally-based relatively autonomous branches. Transnationalisation is, therefore, much more integrated in the case of APC and LabourStart. ATTAC and Indymedia are more embedded in a local or national context and see the transnational as linking up different local initiatives into a common frame of meaning, reference and, at times, action. The degree of transnationalisation in the cases of ATTAC and Indymedia should therefore be qualified as rather moderate, while it is much stronger and more unbounded in the cases of APC and LabourStart. In addition to the differences that occur on the organisational level, the unbounded-ness of transnational organisations also has to be graded in terms of geographical spread and cultural ties.

As figure 4.1 illustrates, although all organisations have a considerable international presence, developing countries are often under-represented. Indymedia, for example, is active in most Western countries, but is only present in three English-speaking African countries (Cameroon, South Africa and Nigeria), two Middle-Eastern (Israel and Palestine) and two South Asian (India and Indonesia). ATTAC has an important presence in Europe, covers five African countries and six Latin American countries, but is noticeably absent in Asia and the Middle East.

In addition to the geographical disparities, there are also cultural divides that determine the nature of transnationalisation. Although all organisations make efforts

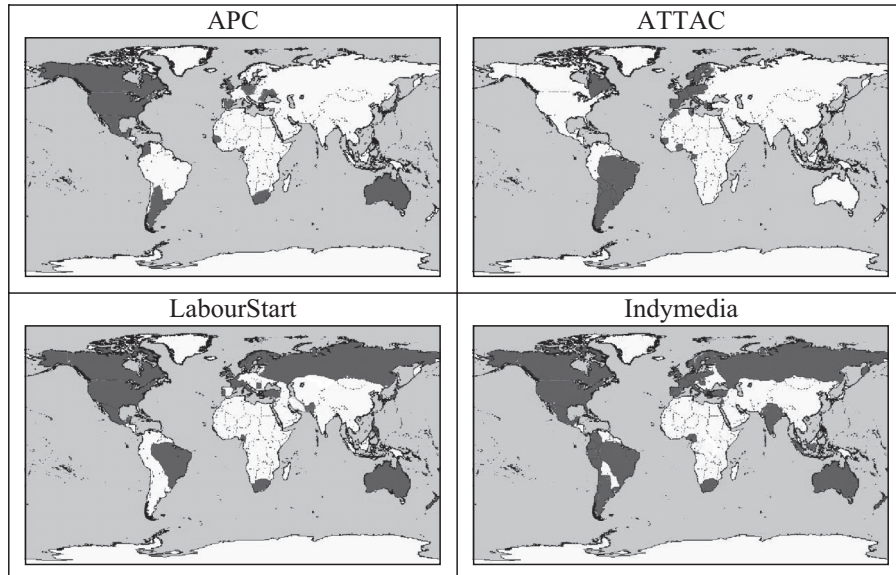


Figure 4.1 Geographical Spread of Organisations

to provide information in multiple languages and often have a considerable number of volunteer translators at their disposal, language barriers, nevertheless, remain an important problem. The dominant language is often English or – in the case of ATTAC – French. The absence of an independent media centre in French Africa is revealing about the influence of language on transnationalisation, although other factors may also play a role in this. The same applies to ATTAC, which is present in four African countries, but all are French-speaking. Its presence in English-speaking countries, on the other hand, is rather weak. Here, it is also telling that all four organisations were founded in Western Europe.

All this raises questions about the nature of the transnational civil society. Aside from the geographical and cultural divisions observed and the still dominant position of the West, it is possible to argue that organisations like ATTAC and Indymedia start from the local ‘bounded’ context and link local issues to global or transnational causes and solutions. APC also comprises local independent organisations – its members – but it is clearly organised in a transnational decentralised manner, going beyond the national ‘bounded’ context. Whereas, an organisation like LabourStart starts at a transnational level and brings in the local, bottom-up perspective through its dispersed correspondents, thereby bypassing the national ‘bounded’ context (cf. labour news from China or Iran).

Table 4.3 Overview of Interaction

Organisation	Degree of Interaction		
	Organisational Level	Virtual Interaction	Real Life Interaction
APC:	Intra (national)	Absent	Absent
	Intra (international)	Strong	Moderate
	Extra	Strong	Moderate
LS:	Intra (national)	Absent	Absent
	Intra (international)	Strong	Weak
	Extra	Exclusively	Absent
ATTAC:	Intra (national)	Moderate	Strong
	Intra (international)	Strong	Weak
	Extra	Moderate	Strong
IMC:	Intra (national)	Moderate	Moderate
	Intra (international)	Strong	Weak
	Extra	Strong	Moderate

* Gradation : Absent, Weak, Moderate, Strong, Exclusive

Degree of Interaction

Table 4.3 provides an overview of the degree of virtual and real-life, interaction per organisation, analysed at the organisational, national and international levels, both internally and externally.

This assessment, based on web analysis and in-depth interviews, gives rise to a number of common themes that elucidate the degree of virtuality in the different cases and the importance of real-life interaction between activists and within these organisations.

Firstly, differences were observed within those organisations that have local branches. For example, while internal virtual interaction in Indymedia Germany is quite strong, real-time, interaction is quite weak. In contrast, Indymedia Belgium still holds weekly editorial real-life meetings because they are a much smaller organisation. Similarly, ATTAC in France is quite a big organisation with over 30,000 members, while in Belgium it is a rather small-scale organisation where face-to-face interaction is much more important.

Secondly, the *offline* remains very important or even crucial. APC, for example, is highly virtualised internally, using closed newsgroups to conduct regular online meetings, but will nevertheless have at least one real-life meeting a year. This points to the importance of face-to-face interaction, social ties and the building of trust amongst activists. The real-life representation of the APC staff within political

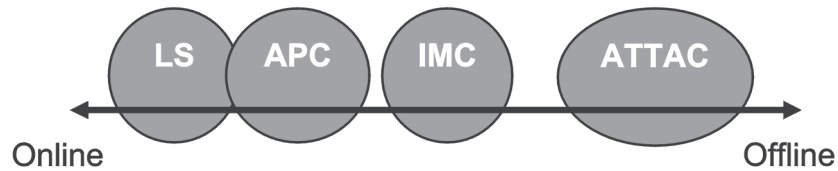


Figure 4.2 Relative Importance of *Offline* and *Online*

structures at the international level is high as well (cf. World Summit on the Information Society). ATTAC is an organisation that has many *offline* events for its members, sympathisers as well as core-activists. It thus seems that social movement organisations, although using ICTs extensively, are seldom totally virtual. Even an organisation such as LabourStart, which organises itself almost exclusively online, did have a (social) get-together event for their correspondents in London (in 2002). These findings confirm other research suggesting that the most successful virtual communities are those that not only interact virtually, but also in real life (Diani, 2001, p.121). Nevertheless, as figure 4.2 indicates, a distinction can be made between the different cases as to the importance of the online versus the offline

Lastly, it is of course useful to look at what makes ICTs and the internet in particular so attractive for social movement organisations. Where do these interactive technologies make a real difference? Here, it has to be noted that many of the usages by organisations for internal or external interaction relate to what social movements have always done, only more efficiently, quicker, cheaper, etc. The provision of information, transnational networking, mobilisation, or advocacy are not new to social movements, but the internet makes it easier to inform independently, to enlarge their scope and constituency, to link up with other organisations in strategic or short-term networks and last but not least to bridge time and space. This last feature is probably one of the most revolutionary potentials of the internet. It allows organisations to decentralise work and to rely on the voluntary work of dispersed sympathisers and activists. In the case of ATTAC, Indymedia and LabourStart this means that people from different countries, with different backgrounds, can contribute to what could be called a virtual and transnational public sphere, disseminating alternative information, developing alternative discourses and/or engaging in common strategies of action. In the case of APC, the internet allows this organisation to be run from different locations world-wide and never the less be efficient and very active at the transnational or global level of governance. As such, the internet sometimes provides relatively small organisations with new means of cheap, highly flexible and instantaneous communication, making organisational decentralisation and at the same time co-operation and integration possible.

The findings in this study show that those organisations that are typically seen as examples of the virtualisation of civil society only have virtual social relations in specific circumstances. Organisations such as ATTAC and Indymedia – even when using the internet extensively – have local branches where members participate and

socialise in real life. Even APC, a much decentralised organisation, has meetings and real life activities. Very often individuals active at the transnational level in organisations such as Indymedia, ATTAC, LabourStart and APC are actively engaged in local branches of the organisation or in other civil society or political organisations. Last but not least, the need to meet face-to-face in order to build confidence and togetherness is always present in a social movement organisation even when they are organised virtually.

ICTs and Mobilisation

Another popular assumption that is often made is that the internet plays an increasingly important role in mobilising civil society and citizens. Before addressing the role of ICTs in the mobilisation for online and/or *offline* direct action, it is necessary to address and identify the different political strategies adopted in the selected cases.

Political strategies

It does not come as a surprise that transnational social movements pursue diverse strategies. However, these strategies aimed at formal politics and/or involved being active politically become even more complex if we take into account the distinction between online and offline, as can be observed in table 4.4.

Three basic strategies were identified: firstly, engaging with formal political actors; secondly, disengaging and pursuing their aims through direct action, public opinion formation and/or changing life-styles; and thirdly, a double strategy combining lobbying with direct action and opinion formation.

Table 4.4 Political Strategies

Organisation	Political Strategies		
	Strategy	Virtual	Real-life
APC	Lobby	Strong	Strong
	Direct Action	Absent	Weak
LS	Lobby	Weak	Moderate
	Direct Action	Moderate	Absent
ATTAC	Lobby	Weak	Strong
	Direct Action	Moderate	Strong
IMC	Lobby	Absent	Absent
	Direct Action	Strong	Strong

* Gradation: *Absent, Weak, Moderate, Strong*

APC and ATTAC lobby extensively. APC, as an advocacy organisation, is especially strong in this regard, both in the real world and in the virtual. It can thus be characterised in terms of a strong involvement and commitment towards civil society participation in processes of global governance (APC, 2003). ATTAC prefers the real world when it comes to lobbying, which it does mainly by networking with other organisations in a platform. So for example, on how to get some form of Tobin-tax implemented through national parliaments. As a portal-organisation LabourStart is not very active politically, but it does point to the (local and international) lobby-structures of the labour movement in the real world and the networks they have. In contrast, Indymedia disengages itself explicitly from formal politics, as it does not believe that a 'dialogue' is possible.

When it comes to direct action, ATTAC follows a double strategy, being strong in lobbying, but also in terms of direct action, foremost *offline*. Indymedia can also be considered strong in direct action and *online*, but also by being present and visual at demonstrations and actions. Direct action is, of course, one of its hallmarks. LabourStart does not engage in direct action in the real world, but does have action alerts through the internet. APC is not that involved in direct action.

In other words, for those organisations that do engage with formal politics and policies, the online does not seem a very efficient realm to lobby. Here, the real world and face-to-face contacts are preferred. Furthermore, it seems to be easier for organisations with a local base, such as ATTAC, to be involved in *offline* direct action, than it is for dispersed organisations. It is, however, possible to develop alternatives through online direct actions, such as LabourStart does. Lastly, another strategy, pursued by Indymedia, consists of disengaging from formal politics and lobby-networks and aiming to change public opinion and life-styles through direct actions, be it online or *offline*.

The next section will develop two cases further in order to identify more precisely the enabling and constraining factors of ICT-use in mobilisation. The first relates to the online action alerts as developed by LabourStart and the second relates to ICT-use in terms of *offline* direct action. A specific direct action will be analysed, namely the occupation of a Forest in Bruges (Belgium) in which both Indymedia and ATTAC were involved.

Online Actions: LabourStart's 'ActNow!'

A section called 'ActNow!' can be found on the LabourStart site.⁵ This provides action alerts in connection with the jailing of labour activists or the boycotting of businesses that exploit their employees. Users and sympathisers are asked, through the site and through email, to act or respond. Email is a very efficient means of reaching large numbers of people rapidly, crossing borders and at a relatively low cost. The viral characteristics of email, forwards and mailing lists also make it relatively easy to set-up a campaign that has the potential to make citizens aware of certain injustices or events and, through online action, put those governments and/or companies under pressure.

Examples of successful actions include the coercion of the Sydney Hilton in Australia in 2002 to make concessions to employees fired because of renovation works to the hotel. The receiving of more than 3000 emails from all over the world

protesting against their practices played an important role in this decision and helped to make the international management team aware of what was initially a local labour conflict. Mark Boyd, a representative of the local union declared afterwards: 'The union understands that the hotel is so aware of the effect of the email campaign that they plan to write to all 3000 people, individually, to tell them they have made peace with the union and their workforce' (quoted in LHMU, 2002).

Also in 2002, the suitcase manufacturer Samsonite was targeted by a world-wide email campaign protesting at the illegal firing of employees in Thailand and demanding the right of employees to be members of a labour union (ICFTU, 2002). Jaturong Sornroong, a local labour activist stated: 'It is clear that without the solidarity action launched by Campaign for Labour Rights, Solidarity Center, AFL-CIO, ICFTU, Clean Clothes Campaign and LabourStart, based on the information provided by the workers through TLC and CLIST, it would not have been possible for the case to be settled with this positive result' (quoted in Cleanclothes, 2002).

Other examples highlight pressure on state, for instance, the stopping of the stoning of the Nigerian woman Amina Amal (Amnesty International Campaign) and the reluctance of the US to execute Mumia Abu Jamal, a Black Panther activist on death row.

Despite successes like these, it is clear that the efficiency of email campaigns is dwindling fast. Firstly, the dramatic rise in so-called spam mails⁶ and the inflation of such e-actions, make citizens less responsive to e-mobilisations. Secondly, those usually targeted by such actions – companies or governments – have also developed counter-strategies. They are much less impressed by the huge numbers of mails and are using filter- or anti-virus software to block the protest mails. Eric Lee (2003) from LabourStart recognises this: 'For more than a decade now, trade unions and others have used email as a powerful tool for *online* campaigning. Despite some notable successes, it is now becoming clearer by the day that this tool is becoming less and less effective.'

To conclude, online action and mobilisation does play a role into making citizens aware of certain issues, events and actions and can have some success, but the increase in spam and the increased number in e-mobilisations are contra-productive for this form of direct action.

Offline Direct Action: The Occupation of the Lapperfort Forest

Activists also intensively use email, mailing lists and the worldwide web to organise and mobilise for *offline* protests and direct action. The success of a direct action is dependent on a variety of interacting factors, of which a media strategy plays an important role, but should also not be exaggerated. This study examined the case of the occupation of a forest by a number of young environmentalists near Brugge (Belgium) to show this complex interplay. In August 2001, activists occupied the forest, which was due to be cut down to make way for roads and an industrial park. The activists stayed there for more than a year after which the owner took them to court and the mayor decided to evict them forcefully from the forest. In the mean time, a coalition of 76 civil society organisations, political parties, unions, ecological movements and other organisations such as ATTAC, had been set-up to support the activists. The activists were evicted, but the Green minister of the environment

started negotiations with the owner of the forest to buy and thus subsequently save the forest.

The main question posed in this chapter is what precise roles the internet played within this direct action. Firstly, the activists had set-up their own site.⁷ This allowed them to communicate independently with their sympathisers and the 'outside' world. Secondly, the activists of the Lappers' Front also communicated regularly through the site of Indymedia-Belgium, which is – like many IMCs – geared towards being an interface for direct action. Indymedia itself also reported extensively on the occupation, the court decision, the eviction and the protests that followed.⁸ Thirdly, the internet also played an important role in mobilising a wider population at short notice and in the preparation of the actions that followed the eviction from the forest.

The Lappersfront launches a call to all sympathisers: To those who can make themselves available when the police clears the forest, we ask to leave an email-address or a telephone-number to Pat; CALL or EMAIL: mA.f@pandora.be, 0497/XX-XX-XX. You will not have to be in the forest yourself, but you can help by forming a buffer (Indymedia, 2002a: *translation by the author*)

Another message on the Indymedia site illustrates how quickly a mobilisation can be organised. Only an hour after actual eviction started, calls were made for a demonstration later in the afternoon: 'URGENT MOBILISATION: 16h00 Town Hall Brugge – Emergency protest meeting for the saving of the Lappersfort forest (...)' Please forward this message to as many people and post it on as many lists and websites' (Indymedia, 2002b: *translation by the author*).

Also, ATTAC-Flanders mobilised for a protest at the headquarters of the owner of the forest (cf. the energy company Tractebel) in Brussels. In total, both alert-protests attracted some 250 people, but in the evening, another demonstration was organised in Brugge, which attracted 500 people and the weekend after between 4,000 and 5,000 turned out, depending on the source. Citizens demonstrated in the streets of Brugge to express their sympathy for the occupiers (Indymedia, 2002c&d). It thus became apparent that the activists and their objectives could count on a considerable degree of support from the local population and that it was not the internet *per se* that played an important role in terms of mobilisation and the success of the action. The (positive) attention in the mainstream media, cultural events during the summer that drew many local people and the personal involvement of the Green party – that is, formal politics – played a much bigger role.

The Lappersfort-case shows how a group of young activists, all-in-all rather marginal and radical, can nevertheless be very present in the public sphere and influence the political agenda by tapping into transnational strategies and struggles, in this case forest-preservation, while at the same time ensuring that they have a local base and support for their direct action. It also shows that the passive involvement by citizens, local, as well as from other places in Belgium, can be transformed into active engagement by protesting against the eviction, thereby showing that public support for the preservation of the forest was strong. However, apart from its potential to inform the outside world independently and as an instant alert-medium to mobilise through Indymedia, email and mailing lists, the internet was not crucial for this action to be successful.

ICT's and the Public Sphere

Another claim often made is that the internet – in particular online discussions and more recently blogs – enriches the public sphere. An inter-related claim suggests that public forums and discussion-mailing lists allow for a transnational public sphere to thrive and global citizens to emerge. However, the evidence from the three cases⁹ of interactive spaces analysed here suggests otherwise. Before returning to this, the different cases will be introduced through a short assessment of the variety of participants, the transnational character of the issues discussed and the degree and nature of debate or interaction between participants.

LabourStart Web Forum 'Terror and the War on Terror'

The LabourStart Web forum had at the time of analysis some 1,400 registered users. Out of a total of 35 forums, only nine had more than 50 postings and 15 more than 20 postings. It is fair to say that most forums were not used at all. There were, however, a few exceptions. The forum 'Terror and the War on Terror' is an example of such a 'popular' forum created by LabourStart itself. This LabourStart-forum was analysed during a period of three months.¹⁰ Of the 454 postings made by some 40 participants, 212 were actual contributions, the other 242 postings were reactions to these contributions. Contributions originated from six countries, the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia and finally India. The number of participants from those countries differs but it is fair to say that the majority of participants come from the UK and the US. Some participants from other countries have, however, been very active in posting contributions. In so far that it was possible to determine, almost all participants in the forum appeared to be male. The language used was English. The transnational character of issues could be described as rather moderate as the content of the online-forum focused both on issues linked to a local/national context, such as the American and British stance and war-efforts, and more transnational issues such as the socio-economic and geo-political reasons that make terrorist activity flourish or international law and rights. In terms of debate, only a small group of participants really engage in discussions with each other – about a 30% of messages were real debate and exchange of arguments between participants. Also, 70% of the posted contributions (reactions not counted) came from five very active members of the forum. Overall, the discussions could however be qualified as being of a high level. Confrontations and arguments were sometimes heated, but never became seriously enflamed. This latter observation may be due to a common ideological framework from which most participants developed their opinions. It was also apparent that most participants were also politically active in the 'real' world.

ATTAC.be Mailing List

ATTAC uses mailing lists a lot for internal organisation and as a discussion-platform. Several local branches have discussion mailing lists where members and non-members can discuss current issues. In order to subscribe to one of these ATTAC lists the user has to register with an email address. Some mailing lists ask users to present themselves, others are more open. The discussion mailing list of ATTAC-Belgium

was analysed during a period of three months.¹¹ During that period, some 40 active members posted 410 messages. About the same number of subscribers (46) were 'passive'. The participants were mostly sympathisers of (French-speaking) ATTAC-Belgium and thus embedded in a local context. Most active participants were male and the dominant language was French, but there were also messages in Dutch posted. Who the passive subscribers – or so-called lurkers – of this discussion mailing list are and what they do with the messages they receive is in a sense a black box, requiring additional research. Some might trash them or read selectively, others might forward some messages to their own networks or even to other mailing lists. The issues raised by the members of the mailing list were very diverse and mostly related to transnational issues. They were heavily influenced by what happens in 'the world', although very little was said about Africa and Asia. The favourite topic during the period of analysis was definitely the conflict between Palestine and Israel, which led to heated debates and outspoken opinions. Of the more than 400 messages, only a third could be attributed to real discussion and debate among the members of the list. Discussion between participants on the mailing list only occurred on a limited number of issues; the conflict between Israel and Palestine, globalisation, the repression of demonstrations by police forces and privacy. Debate itself was, however, rather sterile, as it often only took place between a limited number of very active members of the list and – as was the case with the LabourStart-forum – it was also located within an ideologically homogeneous framework of reference. Nevertheless, points of view, especially on the Middle East conflict, were sometimes opposed, but flaming did not occur.

Indymedia Spontaneous Forum on the Murder of Pim Fortuyn

Lastly, one might say that almost each article published by Indymedia could potentially develop into a forum, as it is possible to react to the posting, as well as to reactions of others. This way of integrating interactivity within an alternative news site has a relatively low threshold to participate in discussions and can be considered as stimulating debate and participatory communication. Some posted articles stimulate much reaction and develop into a fierce debate among the 'readers' turning in 'participants'. A short article on the Dutch site of Indymedia about the murder of the Dutch right-wing populist leader Pim Fortuyn provoked some 270 messages in one week, posted by about 110 participants.¹² As most postings used a pseudonym and were therefore anonymous, it was in theory difficult to determine where the participants came from. Content-analysis revealed however that there were two main categories of participants, Dutch people, of different opinions, and Dutch-speaking Belgians, eager to make the comparison with the North-Belgian fascist party Vlaams Blok. There were also a few comments from Spain and UK, but this did not prompt the 'Dutch-speakers' to switch into another language and engage with the 'foreign' comments! Although difficult to prove empirically, the fluid character of the Indymedia-format also seemed to attract more participants who were not politically active in the 'real' world. In addition to the discussion between Dutch participants and Belgian participants – which referred mainly to local contexts – the debate expanded into the, perhaps more interesting, discussion on the defence of democracy against anti-democratic forces and more specifically whether it is justified to use violence

in the fight against fascism and other extreme right wing movements in society. Populism and the rise of fascism are phenomena present in many European countries. Within this context, the transnational character of the issues addressed could be described as moderate, relating to a local context but also going beyond. About two-thirds of the participants posted only one message in reaction to the article or to a posting by someone else; 25 participants posted between two and five messages, while only nine out of 110 participants posted more than five messages. One participant posted 25 messages. The way this spontaneous forum unfolded shows the fluid character of ICT-mediated participation. During the one-week timeframe of the analysis, new participants kept coming in, most only posting one message, but some staying on and throwing themselves into the ongoing discussion. The debate between the participants could be characterised as high quality, hefty and at times very argumentative. Most comments condemned the murder, many referred to the personality of Fortuyn and the ideology he personified, but some participants to the spontaneous forum went so far as to justify the murder by stating, ‘a good fascist is a dead fascist’ or ‘who’s next?’. Such strong views were however countered by other participants. The result were some severe insults – ‘you are a shortsighted ASSHOLE’ or ‘Be careful, doomsday will come!!! All left-wing activists must fear for their life’.¹³ This kind of flaming of course had its affect on the ongoing debate and made some participants quit the forum.

Assessment

It has to be noted that the use of the internet for interactive debate and the construction of a transnational public sphere is burdened with many constraints.

The degree of interactivity or real debate is often rather weak. The forums and mailing lists are also used to inform or to mobilise. Furthermore, often only a limited number of (male) participants really discuss issues with each other. The analysis of the ATTAC mailing list as well as the LS-forum confirms other studies that found online engagement in forums is cyclical, tends to be dominated by those already politically active in the *offline* world and functions within a homogeneous ideological framework (see Hill & Hughes 1998; Wilhelm, 2000). The spontaneous Indymedia-forum differs from the two other examples in many ways. It shows that one sensitising issue can attract a diversity of participants and opinions in a short period. It can also be assumed that most of the Indymedia-forum participants are not politically

Table 4.5 Constraints on the Construction of a Public Sphere

	Number of Participants	Variety of Participants	Transnationality of Issues	Degree of Debate
LabourStart	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
l480ATTAC	Low	Low	High	Moderate
Indymedia	High	Low	Moderate	High

active *offline*. However, this also led to insulting postings and rows within the spontaneously emerged forum. Here, it is necessary to bear in mind that passions, conflict and opposed ideological views – certainly towards anti-democratic forces and essentialist discourses – relate more to political debate in the ‘real’ world than discussions between like-minded participants reasoning within a more or less common ideological framework (Mouffe, 2002).

However, it is fair to state that (politically active) citizens engaging in a forum or discussion list do contribute to ongoing debates within the public sphere on local, but also on a whole range of transnational or unbounded issues. Here the internet does facilitate short-term, as well as longer-term interactive civic engagement, which can be rather passive (receiving mails from a mailing list) or more active (posting messages, discussing). The internet as a medium is also well adapted to accommodate the present fluid nature of political engagement. As such, interactive forums and mailing lists potentially contribute to an emerging transnational public sphere and the development of ideas of unbounded citizenship. But, it has to be noted that in online debate linguistic and cultural boundaries play an important role. English was dominant in the case of the LabourStart-Forum, French in the case of the ATTAC-mailing list and Dutch in the case of the Indymedia-forum. It is also crucial to mention global, regional and national digital divides, as constraints on increased engagement and participation in (transnational) debates. This is certainly relevant in view of the overstated claims about the development of a transnational public sphere. There is also a much more dynamic relationship between the local and the transnational. While participants may be active within a locally context, the issues they discuss and relate to can be qualified as transnational, as was the case with the ATTAC mailing list. While the list and its participants were clearly embedded in the local and even regional context of French-speaking Belgium, the issues being discussed and debated were not.

Conclusions

This chapter discussed three main categories of use – to organise, to mobilise and to debate. Each type of specific ICT-use revealed that the often optimistic assumptions and claims, but also the very pessimistic ones, regarding the internet, participation, social movements and democracy need to be shaded and put into an historical, political and inherently social perspective. On the one hand, the potential is there, borne out by indications that (transnational) civil society is becoming ever more adept at using the internet to organise themselves internationally, to network and mobilise at that level and to provide spaces for interactive debate. On the other hand, there is also clear evidence that most of these movements are still rather Western-dominated and also that local cultures or language often still play a major role. In many other ways throughout the analysis a similar double image appears. Although the internet is essential for some of these transnational organisations, the *offline* remains a very important factor, even if they are transnational and dispersed. Social factors, such as trust and the importance of face-to-face contact in a social setting cannot be ignored, although size of the country and of the organisation does influence the degree of virtuality. Many social movements also use the internet to do what they have always

done but by other means. At the same time, the internet is an interactive real-time communication tool that does allow for decentralisation and co-ordination. The internet, as well as transnational strategies, are also being used for organising local struggles and informing about them, but the Lappersfort-case showed that for a direct action and/or a mobilisation to be truly successful, the mainstream media, local constituencies and an active civil society mediating between activists and formal politics are also crucial.

The same shaded perspective emerges with use of ICTs for debate. The empirical analysis of the interactive spaces for online debate shows that the notion of an emerging transnational public sphere is highly problematic. While the issues addressed might be transnational, participants are often located in the Western Hemisphere, discussion often happens between like-minded activists and the importance of language, local cultures as well as the potential for flaming, conflicts with the conceptualisation of a unified – Habermasian – transnational public sphere. Another observation is that the dynamics between the national or local and the transnational are much more complex than often presented. Both ‘identities’ are present within all of us. They co-exist, compete and sometimes even conflict with each other. The internet does, however, allow us to reach out, to go beyond our local-national bounded setting, without however completely detaching ourselves from that local context.

Each time we find a pattern that points to conflicting findings. Discontinuity and agency in some practices, and at the same time (structural) continuities in others. In order to fully get to grips with the nature of ICT-use and the roles that ICTs play within transnationalised civil society organisations we need to combine patterns of discontinuity – such as the increased and more decentralised network capabilities for social movements, alert-mobilisation, facilitation of interactive debate or even the open source software movement, with patterns of continuity – such as user practices, the importance of face-to-face contact, but also the unequal distribution of access and capabilities, the commodification of information, conflicts of interest at a local, national as well as global level and thus structural power relations within society. In this regard, we also need to start asking the non-media centred question: does it make a difference?

Notes

- 1 The author would like to thank Leo Van Audenhove, Kees Brants and Valerie Frissen for their valuable contributions to the research-project and the report.
- 2 Although the term ICTs implies more than the *internet* (cf. mobile technologies, etc), this case study will focus foremost on the *internet* and its uses as an interactive information and communication medium.
- 3 This was loosely based on a typology developed by Bekkers (2000) to frame the notion of virtual organisations
- 4 APC only uses interactive tools for internal online meetings, to which we did not get access for analysis.
- 5 See: <http://www.labourstart.org/actnow.shtml>.
- 6 Unsolicited mail.

- 7 <http://www.lappersfront.tk> (=not online anymore because of too many hits), <http://www.geocities.com/lappersfort/> (=mirror-site).
- 8 For an overview (in Dutch) goto URL: <http://www.indymedia.be/> and type 'Lappersfort' in the search-engine.
- 9 APC has no forums or discussion-mailing lists that are public, they do use these for internal organisation purposes.
- 10 Analysis from 11/11/2001 till 19/02/2002.
- 11 Analysis from 3/03/2002 till 6/06/2002.
- 12 Analysis from 6/05/2002 – the day of the murder – till 15/05/2002.
- 13 Translations by the Author.

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