Cyberspace vs. Face-to-Face: Community Organizing in the New Millennium

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the influences of the Internet on the practice of community organizing. There are continuing questions over the scale of community organizing—how much to focus on the local versus the global—as well as over the models of social action—whether to organize institutions or individuals, use conflict or cooperation tactics, and other questions. This paper assesses whether the growing involvement of the Internet in community organizing has any influence on those questions. It looks at the early days of the Internet in community organizing, with particular attention to the free software movement, the Zapatista rebellion, the Communications Decency Act, and the early anti-globalization movement. The analysis of those cases shows that the Internet has influenced the scale of community organizing, allowing for a much better link between local and global efforts. The Internet has not, however, ushered in new effective models of organizing.

Introduction

During the early years of the website and email listserv called COMM-ORG (2002), devoted to the issues of community organizing, the list was populated mainly by academics who had limited Internet experience.

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While some of the subscribers were eager to connect with other academics who cared about and understood community organizing, their efforts to infect the community organizers with an enthusiasm for the new medium known as the Internet were generally met with indifference or guillaws. Community organizers, who did the hard work of building face-to-face relationships in poor neighborhoods, did not even have computers at the time, let alone Internet access.

Much has changed since those “early” days of the Internet. As the new millennium dawned, COMM-ORG grew to over 800 members, about half of them community organizers. And not only do community organizers have computers and Internet access, but an increasing number of them are organizing their constituencies around the issue of getting access to technology and acquiring the skills to use it. But as the Internet becomes an increasing focus of organizers, activists, and others involved in political issues, there are many fears and questions. How should we use the Internet? Of what use is it? What dangers does it present? Does it help link the local and the global or alienate the individual from both? Will it take community organizing and social action to the next level or reduce it to “virtual” action?

The purpose of this paper is to begin addressing these questions by looking at how the Internet was used in community organizing and social action in the 1990s. It will review existing secondary literature on cases of the Internet as used in local and global organizing around the world in the 1990s. Why focus on the early cases? It is in the early cases that we can see the role of the Internet most clearly, where it served distinctive purposes. Today the Internet is a given in any social action, often in combination with cell phones, global positioning technology, and encrypted communication strategies. Determining the unique role of the Internet in this sea of technology is difficult indeed. But, as we will see, the Internet played very distinct and crucial roles in the 1990s. By focusing on the interaction of the Internet and community organizing, we can inform both the analysis and the use of the Internet in social action today. Most specifically, we can see how the Internet affects the scale of community organizing (local versus global) and the models of community organizing.

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The Question of Community and Social Change

In this era of omnipresent communication and information technology, perhaps predictably, we hear the cry from all quarters for the resurrection and protection of community. The mild version of this is the civic participation perspective. The proponents of this perspective want to rebuild face-to-face communities. They appear in the guise of “communitarians” (Etzioni 1995, 1996), “new urbanists” (Wood n.d.; Davis 1997; Beatley and Manning 1997), and a variety of lesser-named practices.

The more muscular model for building collective power is the community organizing perspective. Community organizers want not only to rebuild civic community, but also to transform the structure of power that stands in the way of civic community. They do this by building organizations controlled by people normally shut out from decision-making power, that then go on to fight for changes in the distribution of power (Beckwith and Lopez 1997; Alinsky 1969, 1971). Community organizing has historically focused on building a localized social movement in places as small as a single neighborhood. This is quite different from the social movement perspective adopted by many who see broad-scale national-level or even global-level change as the starting point rather than the ending point. Community organizing is the “backstage” (Goffman 1959) work needed to build a public social movement, focusing on the quasi-private setting of the community (Stall and Stoecker 1998)—in contrast to social movements, which focus on public large-scale action. Community organizing begins as work in local settings to empower individuals to build relationships and organizations and to create action for social change (Beckwith and Lopez 1997; Bobo, Kendall and Max 1991; Kahn 1991). It is the process of building a constituency that can create a larger social movement. In the United States, community organizing has been exemplified by small local organizations such as the Montgomery Improvement Association, which helped lead the famed Montgomery Bus Boycott (Morris 1984) and ultimately provided the impetus for a national Civil Rights Movement. It is this second community organizing perspective that is the focus of this paper.

Community organizing has experienced a resurgence during the past decade, with the growth in the United States of regional and national community organizing networks such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) (Tresser 2002), the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) (2002), and the New Party (n.d.) in their Living Wage efforts, National People’s Action (2001), the Gamaliel Network (2002), the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (2001), and Direct Action and Research Training (DART) (2001). There has also been an explosion of local community organizing groups (COMM-ORG 2002b),
with some having achieved national prominence, for example, the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union (n.d.), the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (2002), and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (2001), among others. The rapidly expanding National Organizers Alliance (2000) has risen to the task of linking all the disparate efforts. As the practice of community organizing expands across the United States, it is also interacting with a variety of efforts occurring globally through the efforts of the National Organizers Alliance, COMM-ORG, and other fellow travelers.

As vibrant as the practice of community organizing has become, however, it has been unable to resolve two long-standing conundrums. The questions of “what works” and “what scale” haunt the practice.

On the question of what works, there are those who believe that every community-organizing situation is so unique that there is no hope of ever building more general models. And there are others, of course, who adhere rigidly to their own special model of organizing. The champions of various organizing models draw sometimes, intense boundaries between issues such as the “institutional model,” which believes that existing institutions and organizations are the basic building blocks of community organizing, and the “individual membership model,” which believes that individuals are the basic building blocks. They argue whether organizing the poor or the working class should come first if real social change is to be made. They also argue over whether “confrontation tactics” or “consensus tactics” are the most effective means for winning power. They argue over whether multi-local “networks” such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (Tresser 2002) are more effective than independent “unaffiliated” local organizations.²

On the question of what scale, there are those who believe that everything must start and focus on building face-to-face relationships in specific local places. For these organizers, success is building a strong neighborhood organization. There are others who believe that nothing can change until people are organized on a less face-to-face but much broader geographic level. These groups, following the “Public Interest Research Group” or “Citizen Action” model, often do not operate at any level lower than state policy. Yet others believe that, until community organizers can bring groups together at the national level, real victory will remain elusive. Even when there is agreement about the goal of impacting national policy, there is disagreement between social movement activists and community organizers over whether a national campaign requires strong local chapters.

² Many of those groups also come together under the general umbrella of the National Organizer’s Alliance (1999).
Several questions, therefore, emerge: Can we build organizing models that apply across situations? How much should we concentrate on a local vs. a regional, national, or even global scale? How does the presence of the Internet influence these debates about scale and model?

**The Question of the Internet**

The Internet is a horribly contradictory beast. It provides more people with more access to more information, and more means to present their own information than any other medium. We need only to think about the resource difference in creating a newspaper, or a community cable TV show, compared to creating a website. Also on the optimistic side is the promise of “e-democracy”—that through the Internet we can participate in public policy construction in ways never before imagined. We can have direct discussions about policy questions, with policy makers, and even vote (Minnesota e-democracy 2002) from our keyboards.

We can say, therefore, that the Internet is the very embodiment of information democracy. At the same time, we know that because there are no regulations on web content, it is often impossible to tell what information is good and what is bad. And, of course, now that corporations have discovered the Internet, the chances that it will become just another exclusive and restrictive conspicuous consumption junkyard grow ever greater. If we try to build e-democracy without being able to determine what information fanatics and corporations are delivering, are we really better off?

Those of us who care about community also fear that the Internet is isolating us in front of our monitors, keeping us off the streets and ever more brain-addled by junk media. There are reports of research on personal and family relationships strained by “excessive” Internet use (Greene, 1998) and fears of “net addiction.” At the same time, it also appears that much of people’s Internet time is coming out of their TV time (Patrick 1997; Moskowitz 1998; UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2000). E-mail is connecting more people than ever before. Of the many people who would never dream of picking up a pen and writing a letter, how many send out e-mail messages each day?

But even with all this communication, what is the quality of these cyber-based relationships? Sociologists like to distinguish between “primary” relationships and “secondary” relationships, also called “strong ties” and “weak ties” (Granovetter 1973). Strong ties or primary relationships are the “I would do anything for you” kind of relationships and, for most of us, are precious few. Weak ties or secondary relationships are the “Hi, how ya’ doin’” kind of relationships. We have many more of these. How many of those chat room, e-mail, and on-line forum relationships can we really
count as primary relationships? Or even secondary relationships? Many of us can cite the weak ties relationships we have built or maintained through e-mail, and some of us can even relate stories of strong ties that began on the Internet. But most of us also know that the bulk of the interaction on the Internet is with people whom we either know little about or know little that we have verified. Perhaps, to the continuum of “strong ties” and “weak ties” we should add “no ties” since so much Internet communication is faceless one-dimensional stranger-to-stranger interaction.

What does this mean for community organizing? Essentially, the implications are equally contradictory. There is more information available than ever before through which to build an organizing campaign. On the other hand, getting it, sifting it, evaluating it, and using it can be a time-consuming distraction. Doug Schuler (1996) quotes University of Washington professor Philip Bereano as saying “Only the naive or the scurrilous believe the Third Wave claim that ‘information is power.’ Power is power, and information is particularly useful to those who are already powerful.” Schuler himself goes on to say:

Information is actually quite plentiful: we are already on the receiving end of a firehose of information with neither the tools or the time we need to give it adequate consideration. If all this information were power then surely there would be enough power for everybody! We find that the opposite is closer to the truth: the asymmetry of power is becoming greater every day, and computer networks are probably contributing to the problem.

Simply dealing with information issues can consume all of our energy. At the same time, so many organizing battles are lost because the activists have not done their research, or have over-interpreted their information, or have substituted fiction for the information they do not have. Here the Internet provides its greatest potential. For example, the actual text of bills in Congress can be retrieved (Thomas 2002) and then can be distributed by e-mail; targeted online research can be completed (COMM-ORG 2002c); training materials can be retrieved (COMM-ORG 2002d) and even a strategic plan can be completed (Innovation Network, Inc. 2001).

Then there is the question of relationships. Available research on social movements shows that weak ties are often the basis for movement recruitment (Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980; Klandermans and Oegema 1987). Weak ties connect separate networks. A union member who has an acquaintance at the church and a church member who has an acquaintance at the local women’s club link three potentially mobilizable networks. But we also know that sustaining a challenge over the long haul, particularly one that requires some personal risk, may be best done through strong ties (McAdam 1986).

Presently, the worst aspect of the Internet appears to be the number of people who use it for the “no ties” strategy of mobilization. In the
late 1990s, a group formed to get TIAA-CREF (an academics retirement fund) to divest its tobacco stock holdings and switch to socially responsible investing. They sent a mass e-mail out to a thousand-some recipients, and all they got were irate responses from people who did not know that they were on the list, did not know anyone else on the list, and did not want to be on the list. Even worse, because of the way the list was structured, each irate reply went back to the thousand-some original recipients, inciting even more irate replies from the people who did not want to receive the irate replies. The “organizers” of the TIAA-CREF campaign did not know the recipients, and they did not even try to get to know them. Many people today probably belong to listservs and receive many calls to action through those lists. But there are those (Agre 1996; 1999) who are skeptical that mass e-mail from stranger-to-stranger, using the “no-ties” model of community organizing, matters.

At the same time, however, the Internet can build weak ties and even strong ties. People learn about each other through seeing their name on a list message, or finding their website, and then contacting each other one-on-one. A few exchanged e-mails may lead to a phone call, and even a face-to-face meeting. Particularly for those who may feel isolated in their local circumstances, the Internet becomes a lifeline. And those who can traverse the divide between local space and cyberspace can become the weak ties that link neighborhood organizing to regional, national, and even global efforts.

To the organizing issues of model and scale, therefore, we can add the Internet issues of information and communication. How do these interact? Generally, information can allow us to build models and show how they can be adapted across diverse circumstances. Of course, bad information will lead to bad models. Communication can allow us to strengthen local organizing and better link it to larger efforts. That communication can also dissipate organizing energy if it is not building weak ties and then strong ties. When the organizing issues of model and scale are combined with the Internet issues of information and communication, the contradictions multiply. There are currently no clear paths on how to use the Internet across different organizing models and in service of different scales (local to global), but a few examples may illustrate some of the possibilities.

**Organizing and the Internet: The Early Days**

In some ways, the connection between organizing and the Internet developed in the 1960s, before the Internet even existed. Back then a group of computer programmers created a software “sharing community,” that, at the time, was just another reflection of the collectivist counterculture springing up in all major social institutions. Richard Stallman of MIT
became part of that group. In the 1980s the community began to disintegrate. But in the mid-1980s, Stallman helped found the GNU (which stands for GNU’s Not Unix—a form of acronym unique to computer hacker culture where the first letter is meaningless) project to create completely free computer software. Free, in this context, meant that the software would be available without cost, and its “code” (the instructions that make the software work) would be freely available to anyone to modify, in contrast to a corporation like Microsoft, which keeps its code a secret. This led to the founding of the Free Software Foundation and the practice of “copylefting” software to make sure that the computer code of the GNU’s software was always freely available to anyone to develop and modify (Stallman 2001). “Copylefting,” a political tongue-in-cheek transposition of “copyrighting,” created a new definition of information as not just publicly available but also protected from ever being made secret or used for profit (Free Software Foundation 2002).

One of the main goals of the GNU was to create an alternative operating system. This was a crucial step. Operating systems, such as the Microsoft Windows operating system, provide the rules that all other computer software, such as word processors, must follow. The dream of a free operating system did not come quickly. But by the early 1990s a Finnish computer programmer named Linus Torvalds—disgusted with the lack of reliability and flexibility of Microsoft Windows and the cost of the Unix operating system used by many large mainframe computers—had created the basics of a free operating system, operating on Unix principles. This operating system, now known as Linux, came together with the GNU and provided the foundation for the full-fledged Linux alternatives we see today, especially the Linux/Gnome project (Gnome 2002; Stallman 2001). This was quite literally a global project, a GNU-licensed free software, and varieties of the Linux operating system were developed and tested by thousands, if not millions, of people operating around the globe and communicating via the Internet (Linux Online 2001). Today, computer users can meet all of their computing needs without ever spending a dime on software.

The free software movement, organizing against corporate-controlled software on a global basis, provided the model for how to use the Internet for community organizing. That model has developed rapidly in place-based community organizing.

Perhaps the first case showing the Internet’s role in place-based activism came from events in China surrounding the Tiananmen Square occupation in 1989. With virtually every other source of contact between activists and the outside world shut off, the Internet became a means of getting information from activists out, and of getting information of the outside
world's reactions in to the activists. The Chinese government knew well how to censor the most popular forms of communication of the time, but not e-mail; thus, long before the Internet was a pop culture revolution, it was an important source of communication and fundraising (Swett 1995).

The next important case was the reaction against the 1996 United States "Communications Decency Act," a clumsy attempt to control pornography on the Internet. With this case, the Internet went from being simply an information conduit to becoming an activist medium. At the moment that President Clinton signed the bill at 11 am on February 8, 1996, thousands of people protested by simultaneously switching the backgrounds of their websites to black. This was a substantial number in these early days of the Internet before the web's explosion of popularity—it took some organizing. The Coalition to Stop Net Censorship, that was sponsoring the "Paint the Web Black" campaign, had to get the word out. They had to teach people how to make the technical switch at just the right moment. The activism continued with an attempt to crash the White House server by a massive timed e-mail protest. Activists got a quick court decision against the Telecomm Act's censorship provisions in mid-1996 and the Supreme Court affirmed that decision in mid-1997; it is not clear how effective their efforts actually would have been in influencing legislators. However, these cyberactivists were also able to generate 115,000 plus signatures in five months, supporting legislation to help families protect children from Internet pornography without imposing censorship (Akdeniz 1997; Citizens Internet Empowerment Coalition 1997; Center for Democracy and Technology 2001).

Another important example comes from Chiapas, Mexico. There the Zapatistas, based in the indigenous population of the region, have been struggling against cultural, and we could also say actual, genocide. Like student activists in China, the Zapatistas have been effectively cut off from access to the usual media sources. Also like in China, the Internet became an important source of organizing support. But the Zapatistas have added several dimensions to our usual understanding of the Internet in activism. One question, for example, might be raised: "How many people in one of the poorest regions of a poor country actually have Internet access?" The answer would be "not many." So Internet communication has to be mediated. As one activist says:

Despite all the media hype which came with the discovery of the role of cyberspace in circulating Zapatista words and ideas, subcommandante Marcos is not sitting in some jungle camp uploading EZLN communiqués

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3 Voters Telecommunication Watch (1996b) listed over 1400 websites, while the Citizens Internet Empowerment Coalition (1996) listed over 4000.
via mobile telephone modem directly to the Internet. Zapatista messages have to be hand-carried through the lines of military encirclement and uploaded by others to the networks of solidarity. (Cleaver 1999)

Much of the Zapatista Internet communication is about practical issues. When the Mexican government shut down a sympathetic radio station, supporters used the Internet to mobilize pressure, and the radio station returned to the air (Cleaver 1999). Another story is told of a Chase Manhattan Bank memorandum pressuring the Mexican government to crush the Zapatistas. The memorandum was revealed in a low-circulation print article by the progressive journalist Alexander Cockburn, but then widely redistributed through the Internet. The resulting protests led Chase to abandon its efforts (Wehling 1995).

Additionally, around the very practical concerns in the struggle of the Zapatistas are complex and abstract issues of global capitalism and colonization. The Internet has become a source of a global discussion that feeds the simultaneous development of Zapatista political economic theory and radical political economic theory around the globe. One manifestation of that discussion was a 1996 event in Chiapas where over 3,000 grassroots activists and intellectuals from 42 countries on 5 continents met to discuss the linkages between the theoretical global political economic issues and the practical strategic issues facing the Zapatistas and other insurgencies around the globe. By the end of the 1990s, a global activist network was supporting the people of Chiapas and each other and constructing theory to explain how global capitalism works and how it can be resisted (Acción Zapatista 2000). The Zapatista movement has also been at the center of people’s thinking about how the medium of the Internet and related media can engage in social struggle (Chiapas Media Project n.d.; ZapNet 1996). Today, the Zapatistas have won negotiations with the new Mexican government and have progressed toward an indigenous rights bill.

Perhaps the most successful example of the Internet in activism was the successful scuttling of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in 1998. The MAI was the brainchild of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development—essentially a plan for global corporate rule that would have placed corporations above national laws. Among the groups who organized to stop the MAI was the Council of Canadians, who got a draft report of the MAI plan and posted it on their website (Drohan 1998). On the other side of the world, the Malaysian-based Third World Network (2002) joined in the opposition leadership. From there, organizers built a global coalition of 565 community-based organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from 68 countries (Third World Network 1997), mainly through Internet communication.
The Internet was the perfect medium for globally organized opposition to global corporate rule. As Maude Barlow, the chairwoman of the Council of Canadians, has stated, "We are in constant contact with our allies in other countries. If a negotiator says something to someone over a glass of wine, we'll have it on the Internet within an hour, all over the world." OECD members themselves credited the Internet with providing the means for effectively fighting the MAI (Drohan 1998). Joint petitions, e-mail campaigns, call-ins, research posted on the web showing the dangerous underside of the MAI, and then, of course, local face-to-face mobilizations, occupations, street theatre and other actions around the globe to pressure individual governments, including an "International Week of Action" on February 7-17 1998 (Khor 1998)—all were highly effective. When activists got France to withdraw from the MAI, they knew they had the momentum to stop the deal.

It is difficult to say whether this international level of community organizing could have occurred without the Internet. At the very least, it would have been a lot much more expensive and time-consuming for activists to find, develop, and coordinate mobilizable networks. Also, finding the networks may have been where the Internet was essential. Groups too poor to afford dozens of overseas phone calls and too time-stressed to research what group, in what country, was taking what position on global capitalism could get that information through belonging to a few selective e-mail lists, doing a few web searches, and browsing a few websites.

The anti-MAI coalition prepared for the November 1999 World Trade Organization meeting, where they expected another version of the MAI to be on the table. The Third World Network (1999b) quickly gained 414 signatories to a statement opposing a WTO-based trade agreement. People prepared for protest in Seattle as groups from around the world moved into town for massive protests and disruptions (Parrish 1999). The predictions turned out to be understated, if anything. Tens of thousands turned out and shut down most of the first day events of the WTO. The Internet-based protestors out-organized the forces of control in Seattle, after which police from around the state and the National Guard were called in to attempt to control the city. A global network of activists made sure accurate reporting came out of Seattle through the Independent Media Center (2002). They publicized street actions and police brutality using the Internet’s multimedia capacity and found their reporting quickly transported worldwide through various e-mail listservers. The "electrohippies" (2001) conducted a “virtual sit-in” on the official World Trade Organization website (Wall Street Journal 1999). The demonstrations, which were brutally attacked by police and
involved the arrest of 600 people, helped destroy any agreements members of the corporate-dominated WTO hoped to achieve. Most important, in one case, an independent reporter “copylefted” the photography he sent to the Independent Media Center (Herrick 1999). Adopting the copylefting practice of the free software movement brought full circle the connections between those activists who built much of the Internet and those activists who worked on the ground. This global network of activists had subsequently organized large and often disruptive protests everywhere the global capitalists and their governmental supporters met.

Finally, there is the case of MoveOn.Org (2002). Two individuals that became disquieted with Republicans’ apparently obsessive attempts to oust Bill Clinton from the White House formed MoveOn.Org. They made a website with a short on-line form for supporters to fill out. They got the initial word out through, interestingly enough, personal contacts who knew how to get the website advertised (MoveOn.Org 2002b). Within just a few days they had hundreds of thousands of “Signatures” and knew they had stumbled onto a sleeping giant. Through the massive, sudden network they had built up, they were able to conduct e-mail protests that, on at least one occasion, crashed the Congressional e-mail server and left 300,000 e-mail messages undelivered (Crofton Online 1998a). They claim to have ultimately generated over two million e-mails and 250,000 phone calls around the impeachment issue (MoveOn.Org n.d.).

What was most interesting about MoveOn.Org, however, was that, as the impeachment battle dragged on, organizers realized they could not rely on the Internet alone to fight it; so they started organizing a door-to-door petition drive. They went from cyber-activism to face-to-face activism. They mobilized “2,000 volunteers that . . . distributed more than 20,000 paper pages of comments to politicians and directed 30,000 phone calls to district offices” (Brown 1998). Now they have built a political action committee and have expanded their efforts to numerous issues.

How influential MoveOn.Org was in Clinton’s acquittal remains unknown, but we know that the website impacted people who became involved, many of whom are continuing their involvement. In 1999, they had over 500,000 supporters, $13 million, and 750,000 hours pledged by 30,000 volunteers to year 2000 campaigns (MoveOn.Org n.d.). Their ability to shift back and forth between Internet-based and traditional organizing has been impressive so far. They also coined the term “flash campaign” to describe their form of mobilization:

A flash campaign is a completely new phenomenon emerging from the radically reduced cost of communicating. Traditionally, political campaigns have been run by existing organizations with long histories, high overhead and inertia. MoveOn literally sprang from nowhere, with no affiliations
or external funding. This is only possible in a world where you can communicate with 100 million people for $89.95. (MoveOn.Org 1999)

Even where the Internet is not itself a central organizing medium, it is rife with resources for those doing more traditional forms of community organizing. National community organizing networks such as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN 2000), which does community organizing through traditional methods (e.g., door-knocking and neighborhood meetings), maintain e-mail lists to compare strategies and issues across locations. Virtually every major category of activism today, whether social movement-based or community-organizing-based, use the Internet to increase their visibility, maintain internal communication, and connect nationally and globally. They have their own listservs and their own websites. They organize e-mail and online petitions and letter-writing campaigns. They engage in cyber-sabotage of corporate and government websites.

Lessons

What do the early days of the Internet in community organizing say about the current saturation of social activism with the Internet? What do we learn from these examples about the questions of model and scale, and information and communication, in the nexus of community organizing and the Internet?

On the question of how the Internet affects models of community organizing, perhaps most telling is how predictable Internet tactics have become. MoveOn.Org has expanded from its initial narrow scope to a wide variety of issues, using regular e-mail alerts in an attempt to mobilize supporters. It is questionable, however, whether MoveOn.Org has been able to develop weak ties and strong ties or is exemplifying the lack of mobilization characterized by Internet-based "no ties" organizing. The anti-globalization movement, now with an advanced technology infrastructure of cell phones, cyber-command centers, servers and backup servers, and Internet-based visual and audio-reporting technology can still turn out people in the thousands for nearly any meeting of global capital. Instead of the French revolution goal of building the barricades of protest, however, the movement has found itself literally barricaded out of the action and global capital continues to march on.

Thus, the Internet must be understood as an enhancement of traditional forms of social activism and not as a transformation of social activism itself. We are not witnessing a transformation of the repertoire of collective action (Tilly 1978). Or, at least, we are not witnessing a successful transformation. There is no evidence that social action recruited through the Internet, mobilized
through the Internet, and using Internet tactics such as e-mail surveys can replace the face-to-face organizing so necessary to successful social change. The Internet’s ability to dramatically increase the scale of activism can also lead people to bad organizing models. This “cyber-organizing” model, also dubbed “McActivism,” has been promoted since at least 1997 and involves tactics such as e-mail action alerts and web-form protests (Civille 1997). There is a serious misunderstanding it seems, among too many cyber activists, about what it means to organize people in a real struggle against real oppression. As stated by Audrie Krause (1997) of NetAction:

Organizing in cyberspace is really not much different than organizing anywhere else. E-mail action alerts are the electronic version of the flyers that grassroots organizers hand out on street corners or at rallies. The difference is that e-mail alerts reach far more people, reach them instantaneously, and cost nothing to distribute.

The truly important difference is that, in cyber-organizing, people are not developing face-to-face relationships, and when threatening conflict occurs are they going to support each other, for example, getting clubbed, gassed, or worse? We should be wary about relying solely on the Internet for getting people on the streets when what is really needed is disruptive action that requires high-risk involvement that is most likely to occur through strong-tie relationships. Even in Seattle, actions were organized through strong-tie face-to-face affinity groups.

In the United States, much of the recent and mostly unsuccessful struggle to save the Community Reinvestment Act—which is the only thing that gets banks to make loans in poor neighborhoods—from the ravages of a corporate-controlled Congress was waged through listerv announcements. The effort to get TIAA-CREF to disinvest from tobacco profits is being waged through the Internet. Neither of those tactics is building organizations or relationships. As a consequence, these activists are very limited in their tactical responsiveness—no large demonstrations, no high-risk activism. There is a dangerous overconfidence among too many that believe that somehow a mass e-mail to a thousand people, all of whom are strangers, will result in activism of any consequence. Even worse are “chain-letter petitions,” which ask people to sign the petition and e-mail it on to others (Agre 1996). This is an early example of how MoveOn.Org is instructive. Participants realized that sustained activism would require shifting at least partly from a cyber activism model to a face-to-face organizing model (Raney 1999). On the other hand, for quick actions where efficiency and quantity of communication count, such as in policy struggles, the Internet can be a powerful tactic. When the FDIC proposed to monitor individuals’ bank transactions, a Libertarian Party
(LP) activist picked up on it and sent a message to the Party’s 10,000-member e-mail list. That led to a flood of over 200,000 e-mail protest messages being sent to the FDIC through the LP website, and grew the LP e-mail list to 140,000. When there is almost no time to organize anything but a cyber-protest, it is certainly worth the effort. But sustained struggles require sustained relationships.

Community organizing, therefore, is still about face-to-face relationship building, street-level actions, and the hard work of winning hearts and minds. Thus, we cannot think of the Internet as a new form of organizing. Indeed, the models of organizing that the Internet adds to the mix are mostly bad models—ineffective for relationship building or policy transformation.

Where the Internet has had a crucial and positive impact is on the scale of community organizing. What the examples of the 1990s first show is how useful the Internet is for multi-locational organizing. For issues that occur on a global scale, and require coordinated actions in multiple sites, the Internet plays a crucial role. While many may see the Internet as a high-tech high-skill medium that only middle-class white males really use, it has shown amazing ability to reach into the most remote locations, from Chiapas to Kosovo to many others (Verton 1999). Whether it is linking up remote struggles in places such as East Timor or Chiapas with support from the rest of the world, or coordinating global actions against global threats such as the MAI, the Internet clearly excels. We are left to wonder what the results may have been for the Civil Rights Movement, or the anti-war movement, had the Internet been available to those activists. The Internet is cheap, and its reach is nearly instantaneously global. Would the Internet have allowed activists to recruit even more people to even more actions? Would it have allowed for more funds to support more organizing? Would it have allowed for better information about the realities of racism in the United States, or the truth about the Vietnam War?

The second important finding on the question of scale is how the Internet’s information potential can link isolated organizing campaigns to broader structures of support. For groups cut off from access to the mainstream media, such as the Zapatistas, the Internet may not only be the best means but also the only means of getting the word out. The COMM-ORG (2002) community organizing listserv got word of the massacres in Chiapas two days before the mainstream media. Independent Media Center or “Indymedia” (2002), on the web, was the first and best source of information on what was actually happening on the streets of Seattle during the WTO demonstrations and police riots. There is reason to believe that the mainstream media got their initial information from the Internet as well. Of course, there remains here the
problem of information efficiency and accuracy. Even COMM-ORG has occasionally sent out false information. But the anarchist nature of the Internet quickly brings challenge to inaccurate information. Thankfully, on COMM-ORG, there are a number of individuals who watch for false information. The challenge, then, is to build places on the Internet that can be trusted for accurate and useful information on the issues one cares about. This is what makes the website/e-mail combo so powerful. It is difficult to trust information coming through an e-mail alone. But e-mail with a web address, and a site at that address with links to other sources, is more trustworthy. A trusted third party who can verify information independently is even better. Much of that process happens informally now. It would be useful for Internet information verification to be more organized. Perhaps the most important development here is the Independent Media Center (2002), which has grown to become a global network organizing independent alternative reporters. It is often still difficult to verify news reported through Indymedia, but it is interesting that events and actions reported first through Indymedia often find their way to more mainstream media later.

The New Millennium

These lessons do not answer all the questions and fears many of us justifiably have about the Internet. What are those remaining questions?

First, as interaction through the Internet becomes more comfortable for more people will the importance of relationships change? We are currently breeding an “extreme sports” youth culture. They are growing up with the risk of AIDS, the uncertainty created by the very idea of a new millennium, and an inherently unstable economy that makes stable employment a concept relegated to the “good ol’ days.” To them, developing a relationship through the Internet is no more risky than any other part of life. So I wonder, as time moves on, whether Internet-based organizing becomes more effective and face-to-face organizing less important? Will “no ties” cyber-organizing work with the next generation who do not require relationships to take risks?

Second, as global capital becomes more and more powerful, will the necessity of global activism become more and more important? Workers cannot use the old models to fight against corporations. Corporations who can use workers in Bangladesh to undermine labor organizing in Mexico to hold down wages in the United States. Likewise, corporations operating with impunity across national borders make even national government irrelevant as a target. In such cases of frighteningly large, powerful, complex, and footloose corporations, will getting good information and
coordinating highly sophisticated multi-local action be more important than ever?

Of course, even if that is true, the question is whether there will be any “local” left. If the Internet is making some of us a world of networked strangers, it is also leaving many behind (Benton Foundation 1998; U.S. Department of Commerce 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000). What happens to those without Internet access? I completely agree with those who argue that the ultimate cause of the problem is not in the neighborhood but in the effects of global corporate greed. Ultimately, if the problem is to be solved, the cause must be fixed globally to be able to act against global corporate power. At the same time, the social problems caused by global corporate greed do not occur in cyberspace but in real space, and if we neglect organizing in real space we cannot depend on “trickle-down” benefits from any victories at higher levels. It is not enough to win a policy battle. It is easy for a corporation or a government to say, “OK, you win.” But then those victories must be implemented in real places. So those without the Internet do not become part of the struggle unless they become part of the network, and the network does not become relevant unless it is grounded enough to be mobilizable for poor people’s issues. And how do we solve that problem?

While the digital divide is substantial, the gap may be closing (U.S. Department of Commerce 2002), and continuing to reduce that gap is as much an organizing problem as an economic problem. The availability of user-friendly free software, and low-cost Internet access, and the plummeting cost of computers themselves make affordability less and less of a problem all the time. Community computing centers, while a second best alternative to the goal of a computer in every home, actually provide the added benefit of bringing people together face-to-face where they not only can access the Internet but also can organize around issues (Chow et al. 1998). These centers have the potential for being places where people could learn how to use Linux to become part of the alternative rather than using Microsoft Windows to become part of the system.

There are those working in the arena of “community networking” (Schuler n.d., 1996b; Community Networking Initiative 2000), trying to make sure that poor communities are not shut off from the hardware, and the skills, to use the Internet. They are showing results in numerous poor neighborhoods such as East Palo Alto, California (Lillie n.d.). And the wonderful benefit of such projects is that they are building face-to-face relationships at the same time they build cyber-relationships. The regulars that come to the community-computing center, or come to the steering meetings for the local community network, create new forms of relationships in communities that have few other public gathering places (Chapman 1997;
Chow et al. 1998). There is also a new network just formed, the Organizers’ Collaborative (2001), whose goal is “harnessing the collaborative potential of the Internet and working to make computers accessible as a tool in support of community-based, social change organizing.”

Connected with this problem of the digital divide, of course, is the concern that a medium created by the military and bought by corporations cannot possibly serve progressive purposes. That is certainly going to be the case if we put poor people into computer-filled rooms and drill them in how to search for jobs on the Internet and write resumes on Microsoft Word. But that is a perversion of the potential of computer technology and the Internet. What must be remembered is that the Internet was designed to withstand nuclear war so that, if Denver got incinerated, computer communication could automatically switch to use any of the multitudes of remaining paths—it is the most decentralized technology system ever created. Because of the decentralized structure of computer communication, it is impossible for any single organization to monopolize it, and it has led to the most decentralized social system ever created. Keeping it that way is also a community organizing problem. And while the growth of AOL and Web TV and the push for Internet II ⁴ (which would allow single organizations to control the entire pipeline) is terrifying, the growth of Linux and volunteer-based community networks is encouraging.

So what will the future be? The Internet has the power to isolate us and bring us together. It has the power to fool us and inform us. Community organizing has the power to create change, but only when its participants guess right about their context and their strategy. Ultimately, the future will be what we make it. By appropriately bringing together the power of community organizing with the potential of the Internet, we can make the future ours.

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