

Transnational Activist Media Strategies in the Information Society: beyond media-centric thinking

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Introduction

The Internet has provided activists with new opportunities relating to building networks (across borders) and to exchanging alternative information or distributing counter-hegemonic discourses in a more (cost-)efficient way. It has also given activists and civil society organisations more control over the content of their message and the tools to independently inform citizens and sympathisers world-wide. This strength is partly also often a weakness, since the Internet tends to strengthen the fragmentation of the public sphere into what Gitlin (1998) calls 'sphericules'. Contrary to what Gitlin—as well as other authors (Putnam, 1995/2000; Galston, 2003)—assert, this fragmentation is not necessarily to the detriment of democracy. Fragmentation does not exclude strategic co-operation between very different civil society associations—from very loose activist networks to structured and professional civil society organisations or political parties, from revolutionary movements to reformist movements, as the World Social Forum and many co-ordinated actions against international organisations show (Held & McGrew, 2002). Similarly, coalition building also occurs at a national level, where it can potentially be much more effective and influential than at an international or global level. In this regard, transnationalisation should not merely be conceived as actions co-ordinated at an international level, but also as the transnational distribution of counter-hegemonic discourses and action-strategies.

Besides this, it will also be argued that an overemphasis on Internet and media-usages as such, tends to forget that in a mature democracy social change and achieving political aims, happens—has to be fought for—in the real world; gaining support, changing values and channelling those aims to formal politics. Offe (1987:69) refers to this when he speaks of 'non-institutional politics', but this does not mean that institutional politics has become unimportant or insignificant, on the contrary. In this dialectic between non- and institutional politics, media fulfil, increasingly so, a mediating function (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Silverstone, 2005). However, in a democracy the extent and form of social change is determined by citizens—

their (in)capacity, willingness or unwillingness to change behaviour, patterns of consumption, ways of life, and by our formal political systems deciding to encourage, promote change or resist it, discipline it. Although the focus in this chapter is on a progressive movement and direct action, reactionary forces in society also transnationalise and adopt similar media strategies, which should not be ignored.

The case that will be analysed further, is the occupation of the Lappersfort-forest in Bruges (Belgium) in the summer of 2001 by a group of young and radical activists. They stayed there for more than one year before being forcefully evicted by the police. This direct action was supported by a large coalition of very diverse civil society organisations, including labour unions and a political party. The cause of preservation of the forest, the positive representation of the action in the mainstream media, cultural events organised by the activists and the brutality of the eviction made that the action could also generate considerable support amongst the local population. Although the Internet did play an important role in terms of initial mobilisation and self-representation, this case shows that mainstream media, local support and the involvement of formal political actors is more important to the success of a direct action.

This case will help us understand media-strategies by activists, the adoption and adaptation of transnational direct action strategies, and the importance of broad popular and political support for the success of a direct action.

Media and Activism

Most recent empirical studies on activism within communication studies, focus on the opportunities and constraints the Internet provides in organising movements, 'networking', mobilising online, as well as offline, and/or strengthening the public sphere by facilitating discussion and the development of counter-hegemonic discourses (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Dahlberg, 2001; Webster, 2002; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002; Meikle, 2003; Gibson, et al., 2003; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Van de Donk, et al., 2004; Dahlgren, 2005). Alternative information needs alternative channels of distribution and the Internet provides activists with an easy medium for the unbiased and especially (cost)efficient distribution of alternative information across the boundaries of time and space. Its viral characteristics are in this regard an important asset, whereby individuals pass on information through mailing lists or through forwarding the information to their personal and/or professional networks. As such, alternative information can spread rapidly at a limited cost. Besides this, websites allow activists and social movements to be

more in control of their message and representation, which can be seen as empowering. In this regard, websites, e-mail, forums and mailing-lists are used extensively to distribute and share alternative information, to mobilise and organise internally or in coalitions with other organisations, and to a lesser extent to debate issues and strategies (Cammaerts, 2005).

While the Internet increasingly constitutes an opportunity-structure for activists and social movements, in terms of self-representation, mobilising for (direct) actions, or distributing information, it clearly has to be seen as being embedded in a larger media strategy, including other media and ways to distribute their aims and goals. In this regard (positive) attention in the mainstream media, pamphlets or community radio's are as important as it relates more to reaching a broader constituency than those already convinced of your case. An example in this regard, is the coverage of the protests against the EU-summit in Brussels in December 2001, where Indymedia pooled-up with a number of community radio's to form Radio Bruxxel. During 4 days volunteers and activists produced programs covering the summit. These programs featured on several local radio stations and were also streamed through the Internet, so that other activists-radios worldwide could pick-up the feed and re-transmit it. Besides this, many stickers, brochures and pamphlets were also distributed. Although penetration rates of the Internet have risen, the digital divide is still a reality for many people, especially so for disadvantaged groups in society. As such, activists diversify their media-strategies.

The over-emphasis on the Internet as a new means or tool at the hands of activists and social movements also holds the danger in itself that the offline realm is ignored. The nitty-gritty of lobbying, making your case, writing letters, putting pressure on politicians and other stakeholders and indeed also direct actions. It is, however, in that 'real' messy world that social change has to be argued for, winning over the 'hearts and minds' of citizens and political actors. Although in mature democracies violence is discredited as a means to achieve social change, direct action still remains an important 'weapon' for activists and movements. Direct action strategies have, however, undergone considerable changes in recent years, while at the same time also paying tribute to a historical legacy, such as the student movement of the 60s, the green movement, the gay rights movement, even artistic movements such as the Situationists and Fluxus. Armed with historical knowledge current day activism adopts and adapts strategies to the complexities of the present. In this regard can be referred to an increased aesthetisation of activism, popular culture as a means of expression, the carnivalesque character of some demonstrations, also to combining changing values and behaviour of citizens

with political action, as was the case with the green movement (Scott & Street, 2001; Cammaerts, 2006).

As such, use of media—Internet-based, pamphlets, stickers, community radio and mainstream media—should be seen in a dynamic relationship with each other and not in a dichotomous way. Special attention should also go to how direct actions are covered or represented in the mainstream media (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976/1980; Gerarthy, 1996) and the dynamics between the online and offline, to how public support for direct actions and their goals, is transformed in (political) action, be it by citizens through demonstrating or voicing their protest in other ways or by political actors in forcing a public debate or taking legislative initiatives.

Processes of social change have become as complex as our societies and involve both the development of an alternative discourse geared at changing values and behaviour amongst citizens (Melucci, 1981: 179) and the adoption of these discourses (or parts) by formal political actors to vote for legislation and/or regulation to correct imbalances or to stimulate this change in behaviour. Media play a crucial mediating role in this regard, both in terms of the interplay between alternative and mainstream public spheres—providing a platform for alternative discourses, and representation—normalising alternative discourses or lifestyles. Both the green movement and the gay-rights movement illustrate this complex interaction between changing values and behaviours amongst the population, in youth culture, and the gradual often delayed changes in legislation and regulation, be it regarding the adoption of a more ecological lifestyle, separating waste or a more tolerant and more open attitude towards gay life-styles, protection against discrimination and allowing them to adopt children or marry (Feher & Heller, 1983: 37; Offe, 1987; Turner, 2001). Positive representations of ecological discourses or other sexual lifestyles in newscasts, info-tainment programs and even soaps have certainly helped to make these gay- and ecologically friendly views more acceptable within society (Dines & Humez, 2002). Besides this, a new generation of younger politicians makes that these issues also get onto the political agenda, often resulting in new regulation or the abolishment of old rules and norms.

Finally, studies trying to make sense of the impact of the Internet on activism often point to its capacity to transnationalise struggles and build coalitions beyond the nation state (Florini, 2000; Tarrow, 2001; Della Porta, et al., 1999; Glasius, et al., 2005). While this is undoubtedly the case, discourses on transnationalisation need to be refined when confronted with empirical evidence (Van Audenhove, et al., 2002). Three different types of

transnationalisation can be observed. The first type is 'trans-international', strongly organised and integrated at a transnational level, with staff or members dispersed around the globe and aiming to translate local 'grass roots' issues and interests to a global level. Examples of this type are the Transparency International (TI) or the Association for Progressive Communication (APC). A second type of transnationalisation could be called 'trans-local' in that the transnational provides a common frame of reference, but local cells have relative independence and link-up local struggles with an international agenda. Examples of this type are Indymedia or ATTAC, but also 'older' organisations such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International, clearly embedded in a local (offline) context too. However, besides these two, a third—more abstract—type of transnationalisation can be observed. In local struggles at a national level transnational discourses and action-methods are often 'imported' and consequently appropriated and adapted to the local context. This chapter focuses on the latter, more elusive, type of transnationalisation and more specifically on discourses of forest-preservation and the technique of occupation, building tree-cabins and a maze of tunnels. This technique originated in 1993 the UK where a group of local activists from Norwich calling themselves the flowerpot tribe, occupied a small forest to stop the building of a bypass. They belonged to a worldwide movement called Earth First (<http://www.earthfirst.org/>) and also embodied the radicalisation of the ecological movement in the UK (Anonymous, 2003). Many more were to follow.

The Lappersfort-Case

Context

As mentioned before, in August 2001 activists occupied the threatened Lappersfort-Forest on the fringes of the provincial city of Bruges (Belgium), using similar tactics as their UK counterparts some years earlier. The aim of this occupation was to save the forest from being chopped down to make way for a road, an industrial terrain and a bus station. In September 2002, after one year of occupation, Fabricom, the owner of the forest and part of the multinational Tractebel, summoned the activists to court. The judge subsequently summoned the activists to leave the forest immediately. The activists were also ordered to pay an 'occupying fee' of 1€ per person per day should they did not comply. In the mean time, a coalition of 103 small and big organisations—political parties, labour organisations, activist organisations, as well as organisations striving for the conservation of

nature—had joined forces in order to support the Lappers'fronters'. As the green party was part of that coalition, the Flemish green minister for environment started negotiations with the owner Fabricom in order to buy and thus save the forest.

However, mid-October the patience of the major of Bruges ran out and he ordered the police to forcefully evict the activists from the forest. A few hours after the police started their action, a spontaneous demonstration of sympathisers mobilised in the vicinity of the forest, almost everybody was arrested. The policy was very aggressive and even people arriving at the train station were arrested. In the afternoon some 150 sympathisers assembled in front of the city hall to hold a noise-demonstration, many were arrested too. In the evening yet another demonstration started in the city centre of Bruges, which some 500 people attended, no arrest were made. The activists and the demonstrations got a lot of support from the local population, also favouring saving the forest. All this culminated in yet another demonstration the next weekend, which more than 4.000 people attended (Indymedia, 2002a&b). Undisputedly one of the biggest demonstrations the provincial city of Bruges had seen to date, which also showed the local support the activists had gained in the course of their action.

Media-Strategy

The case of the Lappersfort-Forest is a prime example of how ICTs, such as the Internet, but also mobile communication, can foster and sustain real-life direct action, networking and mobilisation. The activists put up their own website¹ where citizens and sympathisers could find information, a petition, contact-information, new actions, etc. An own site allows activists to have more control over their own message, their self-representation and it also often serves as a means to attract new sympathisers and activists.

The site of Indymedia-Belgium was also frequently used to communicate independently to a wider 'alternative' public of sympathisers and fellow activists. Like all Independent Media Centers, Indymedia-Belgium is geared towards being an interface for direct action. As such a lot of information could be found regarding the occupation, the rulings of the judge, the violent eviction from the forest and the actions that followed². One of the interesting articles on the Indymedia-site was an urgent call from the activists for research on the owner of the forest.

¹ <http://www.lappersfront.tk>, not online anymore

² For an overview (in English) go to URL: <http://www.indymedia.be/news/2002/10/36569.php>

"Urgent call from Lappersfront: we want to know our enemy, and we're looking for people that have the time and the knowledge to do this properly. And yes, we're looking for DIRTY business. Fabricom Group is one of the super-lobbying-bastards that are destroying the planet. Lappersfort against Fabricom = David against Goliath." (Indymedia, 2002c)

This call resulted, amongst others, in a short occupation of the offices of Fabricom in Gent (Indymedia, 2002d), as well as the posting of e-mail addresses of Fabricom employers harvested through Google (Indymedia, 2002e)

The Internet also played an important role in mobilising people before and after the evictions started. This real possibility was prepared well in advance. When the judge ruled that they had to leave the forest, the following message appeared on the site of Indymedia.Belgium:

'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, 2002f: translation by the author)

In this regard, it is also noteworthy to mention the use of mobile cell-phones besides e-mail.

When the police actually started their action, almost simultaneously an alert mobilisation call was sent out through mobile communication and the Internet.

"URGENT MOBILISATION: 16h00 Town Hall Bruges - 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 website" (Indymedia, 2002g: translation by the author)

A few hours later ATTAC-Flanders distributed a call for a demonstration in front of the offices of Tractebel in Brussels under the heading 'our world is not for sale', some 100 people showed-up. Although the Internet was crucial for initial alert-mobilisations on the day itself, the mobilisation for the large demonstration on the weekend following eviction was much wider, using mainstream media and pamphlets, as well as mouth to mouth. The Internet was thus instrumental in mobilising initial support, recruit new activists and also in organising resistance to the eviction.

However, a good relationship with the mainstream press was one of the strengths of the activists. Inviting them into the forest, providing them with a good story and a clear-cut message: '*what is forest, stays forest*'. The fact that the action lasted for such a long time and the easy to communicate cause, made the media construct them as perseverant and likeable.

While the activists were a small radical anarchist group, their action was supported by a larger constituency of civil society organisations, which made that the discourses relating to the aims of the action were amplified. One of those closely supporting organisations was the Green Belt Front (GGF). They acknowledge that they would have never become so well known without *'the forces of the fourth power'*, referring to the press. On their website they state 4 principles in dealing with the local and national media, which can be framed as a dynamic and basic-democratic communication strategy;

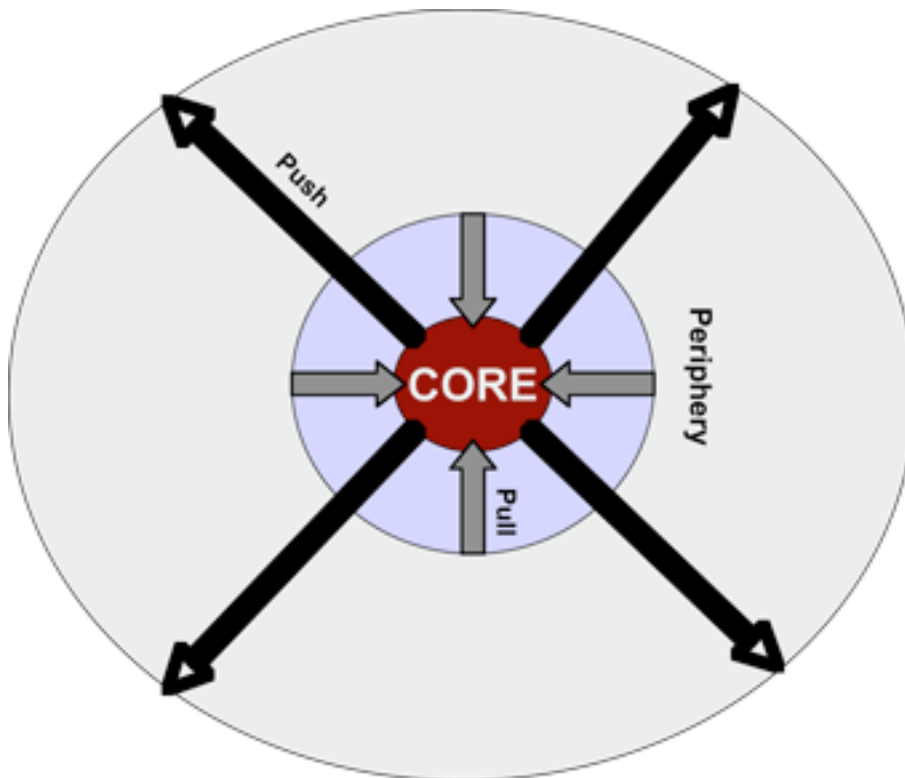
1. *"don't hate the media, be the media*
2. *a correct relationship with the press*
3. *we cannot, won't, should not determine the agenda of the fourth power*
4. *transparency in internal governance and action. (For example, the 'subjects' of our press-releases, the city council, the company Fabricom, etc. – always get a copy)"*

(Site GGF: <http://www.ggf.be/index.htm> – translation by the author)

In the beginning of the action there was only limited attention from the mainstream press for the occupation and the issue of forest-preservation. However, when the activists remained in the forest during the winter it suddenly became a story that was covered in all newspapers, in television news broadcasts, as well as in multiple infotainment kind of programs. The activists were represented as idealist young people who had given-up everything for a just cause and willing to live in difficult 'cold' circumstances for that cause. This raised sympathy for the activists and their aims. Moreover, during the summer times the activists opened-up the forest, which had been closed to the general public for many years, and organised several cultural events which were again covered by the local and national press. These events also attracted large crowds and gave local citizens the opportunity to visit the forest and the activists a way to get their message across in a positive setting. This can also be related to the introduction of popular and youth sub-cultures into activist strategies.

The Internet is most useful at the level of internal communication between dispersed activists, although here the importance of face to face interaction in building trust should not be ignored. Besides this, the Internet also serves as a way to pull sympathisers from the periphery into the core, but in line with Gamson & Wolfsfeld (1993: 116) social movements also need mainstream media to *'broaden the scope of conflict'* and push it's message to a mass audience.

Figure 1: Activist Media Strategy Model



In other words, for a direct action to resonate beyond a 'ghettoized' community of like-minded, beyond the fragmented public spherules of the Internet, where you need to be already interested or semi-informed in order to actively seek information regarding the aims of the action, activist media strategies also need to be directed towards the mainstream public sphere. In this regard a push-strategy is enacted in an attempt to reach a broader constituency and gain public support, which then can potentially transform into political influence.

It can be concluded that the fairly successful Lappersfort direct action adopted a dual communication strategy combining an independent voice through the Internet directed at core supporters and a mediated voice through local and national press directed at the general population. Referring to Ruchts' (2004: 36) quadruple 'A' in activist media strategies—'*abstention, attack, adaptation and alternatives*', the Lapperfort-case clearly combines adaptation to the logic of mass-media with developing alternatives in the form of 'movement controlled media' in order to '*secure autonomy and operational flexibility*' (Rucht, 2004: 55).

Real Politik

It is, however, clear that for a direct action or an innovative idea to have a real impact on society, and especially on the formal democratic process, it has to be able to generate citizen-support and this in turn requires amongst others mobilisation, attention in the mainstream media and coalitions with other civil society organisations. As mentioned before, a large coalition of some 100 civil society organisations, going from citizens-groups, to artist's movements, to environmental groups, to labour unions and a political party, supported the action. This not only ensured that the Lappersfort forest stayed on the political agenda, but also that the pressure for finding a solution to save the forest remained present after the activists were evicted forcefully.

This case is also relevant because of the involvement of formal politics. During the summer of 2002 the North-Belgian minister for the environment, Vera Dua (Green Party), visited the activists in the Lappersfort-forest. When the eviction took place, she issued a press-release (14/10/2002) stating:

*"The Minister would like to point out that an encounter was planned this week between the Minister and Fabricom about the possible purchase of the Lappersfort-forest. The Minister had therefore urged, Fabricom as well as the municipal authorities in Bruges, to wait for the outcome of these negotiations. The Minister is appalled that this did not happen. 'Apparently there are people who don't want a fair solution', the Minister concludes. 'We want to buy the forest and give Bruges a city-forest like no other Flemish city has. We want to do this, but only against a reasonable price'."*²⁷

In this sense the case of the occupation of the Lappersfort-Forest shows how social and ecological struggles by an all in all rather marginal and radical group of young activists can raise a high level of passive engagement or sympathy, which can even transform into active civic engagement and policy-influence at a certain moment in time. We can refer here to the demonstration of 4.000 people after the action, as well as the personal involvement of the Green minister of the environment. Not unimportant in this regard is that it is very 'single' issue, a sympathetic goal, which in part explains why the long struggle to save the Lappersfront-forest was supported by the local population and why subsequently the activists were able to influence public opinion in favour of their cause. In this regard, opening up the forest for visits, the organisation of cultural activities in the summer and also many positive accounts of the action in the mainstream media played an important role.

However, reality is messy and despite the support from the local population, the mainstream and offstream media, as well as (some) formal political actors, the forest is still not saved in its entirety. The new minister for the environment, a Christian Democrat who previously headed an employer's

organisation for medium and small enterprises, delayed reaching a definitive solution, due to corporate pressures of having office-space close to the city centre. As such, 4 years after the occupation, negotiations regarding the future destination of the forest are still ongoing. Vigilance and persistent action by the civil society coalition and a collective of 500 concerned citizens has, however, prevented the destruction of the forest to date. Some 70% of the forest is saved and will become a city-forest, while some 30% is still under threat of being cut down to harbour offices and a road. This also shows that in politics in the real world you seldom get all you want. Diverging and conflicting interests always shape political decisions. In this specific case corporate and/or economic interests did not exactly prevail, but neither were they ignored.

Conclusions

Activists are aware that the Internet, although very useful, also has its limits in terms of reaching a broad audience. Indymedia for example would never have existed without the Internet, but nevertheless they produce brochures and pamphlets to raise awareness of their existence, but also to distribute part of their content to an audience that does not have access to the Internet. In terms of the Lappersfort-case it can be concluded that while the Internet did play an important role in terms of initial/alert mobilisation and self-representation, mainstream media, local support and the involvement of formal political actors is ultimately much more important to the success of a direct action or for the introduction of innovative 'alternative' discourses in society.

This case also shows that a media-centric approach to activism and social change should be avoided. Smart media-strategies certainly contributed to the success of this action, but the determination of the activists and their ability to generate support amongst the population and the press for their cause and strategy was clearly more important. In this regard, the Lappersfort-case shows how a small group of young and all-in-all rather marginal and radical activists, can nevertheless be very present in the dominant public sphere and influence the political agenda by tapping into transnational strategies and struggles, in this case forest-preservation as well as the anti-globalisation movement, while at the same time ensuring that they have a local base and support for their direct action. In other words, transnationalisation occurs at a very local level too.

This case also learns us that the alternative and mainstream should not be conceptualised as being in an opposite or dichotomous relationship with each

other, but rather in a dynamic context of tensions, intersections, overlaps, and push and pull strategies. Revolutionist – anarchist elements put pressure on policy-makers and other actors by acting (and occupying the forest). More reformist elements within civil society recuperate this to some extent and also exert pressure by translating the cause and aims of the action to a broader constituency and audience. This interplay, co-operation, but also tension between revolutionist/utopian strategies and positions on the one hand and reformist/realist strategies and positions on the other constitutes the key to understanding and promoting current processes and struggles of social change in our hyper-modern and still inherently capitalist societies. As such, this case also shows that contrary to the observations of Giltin (1980) in the 1970s, fragmented oppositional movements, composed of groups and organisations with distinct political ideologies and strategies, are able to converge much easier at a given moment in time to foster common aims. It also illustrates that non-institutional politics is not necessarily detached or alienated from institutional politics. This does not mean, however, that capitalist or corporate interests have become less persuasive. Compromises between different interests are inherent to democracy, but in view of the current crisis of representative democracy it is, however, crucial that formal institutional politics provides input-channels for non-institutional actors and actions.

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