Searching the Net: An Analysis of the Democratic Use of Internet by 266 Social Movement Organizations

Press release of the Demos Project
Donatella della Porta, Coordinator of the Demos Project

Social movement organizations use the Internet as an instrument for spreading information, constructing identities, involving new members, and mobilizing on- and off-line. New interactive technologies (such as the Internet) can facilitate the participation of members in the life of an organization and their involvement in the decision making process. Although Internet use is still limited to a particular (although growing) sector of the society, social movement activists are more connected than the general public, and this has been an important incentive for social movement organizations going on the Net. The Internet represents an important opportunity for social movements to counter traditional communication flows of vertical and hierarchical mass media and an opportunity to communicate and to organize beyond borders. In contrast to the television and other high-cost communication media, the Internet has been presented as a technology that allows for broad participation and also reduces hierarchies, favouring horizontal forms of communication. The Internet has certainly increased the amount of information available and favoured pluralism of information. Easier contacts between diverse groups and individuals have also been seen as preconditions for mutual understanding.

This is why in the past years the number of movement organizations with an online presence has grown dramatically. When creating their websites, social movement organizations have often emphasized the role of the Internet presenting it as an extraordinary means to involve members and sympathizers in the democratic processes of an organization. The capacity of the Internet to give more voice to the powerless has been, however, challenged. As other means of communication, the Internet could indeed favour people and organizations already rich in resources. Some scepticism has also emerged about the quality of information available on the Internet (in particular, the difficulties of assessing its reliability) as well as about the capacity of Internet communication to overcome social and/or ideological barriers. In addition, the design and management of websites implies several choices, often between aims that are in reciprocal tensions: stressing the organizational identity or opening up to outsiders; increasing transparency or reserving sections to members; using websites mainly for informing users or for mobilizing them; broadening the debate to people with different opinions, or deepening the discussion in homogeneous groups.
In order to better understand the advantages and challenges of the use of the Internet, the Demos project systematically analysed the main features of the websites of 266 social movement organizations involved in the Global Justice Movement in Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain, Spain and Switzerland, as well as at the transnational level.

First of all, our research confirms that social movement organizations actively use the Internet as a tool for spreading alternative knowledge. Overall, most of the analyzed websites offer a significant amount of information. A widely used form of “political education” consists of publishing articles, papers and dossiers (90%), while bibliographical references are given in 40% of the cases. Interestingly, more than half of the websites present conference and seminar materials that allow interested people to deepen their knowledge on specific topics. A news section is present in almost four fifths of the analysed websites. In order to facilitate access to information, almost 60% have a search engine and nearly 30% a website map.

Websites may also play an important identity-building function. The Internet represents an important opportunity for social movements to overcome the gate keeping role of traditional media and to present themselves to the general public without external manipulation. The websites we have analysed often refer to the identity and the history of the group itself. Overall, around two thirds of them provide an archive of press releases (that is also an important source of information for journalists of traditional media) and an archive of annual reports or a chronology of the history of the organization. Old leaflets give us information about the history of the organizations: about their actions, campaigns, mobilizations, etc. About two fifths of the surveyed organizations archive this type of material and provide documents of past assemblies that are fundamental events in their history. The internal work agenda is published on the websites of about a quarter of our groups. More than 50% of the analyzed websites have a newsletter that in the large majority of the cases is accessible by all users.

The Internet multiplies the opportunities for debating and communicating. Applications for multilateral interactivity like forums, mailing-lists and chat lines are not very common on the analyzed websites. About one third of the websites provide an asynchronous space for discussion (forum and/or mailing-list). In over half of the cases messages can be read without subscribing to them and in almost one third of the cases a specific policy (“netiquette”) or some rules for the participation to the discussion are set. When applications for multilateral interactivity are present, more than half of the websites offer to their users the possibility to read archived messages and about one third specify rules for participation in forums and mailing lists.
The website can also be an instrument for improving the transparency and the accountability of an organization. These functions can be measured by the provision of a series of information on the organization itself (organizational structure, constitution or equivalent document, reachability, information on the leader and on other identified roles) and on its finances. Besides, we also investigated whether information on the website itself (such as number of users and information on the updating) was offered to the general users. In 80% of the cases the website offers information on the physical existence and reachability of the organization. In 70% of the cases such information is directly published on the homepage or just one click away from the homepage. If we consider other dimensions of transparency (at least as far as it is reflected in our indicators), we find that more than 85% of the websites published their constitution (or an equivalent document of the organization) online. Furthermore, almost two thirds of the websites contain information on the organizational structure of the group, while only a quarter provide information on the organization’s finances (a result that can mostly be explained by very low budgets, which are common).

The presence of contacts of people actively involved in the organizations indicates their willingness to open up to public scrutiny by creating direct channels of communication with website users. In this sense, the presence of contacts represents a step beyond unidirectional instruments of communication like a newsletter. Almost 90% of the websites we analysed provide a general email of the organization and 30% have it on the homepage. However, the provision of email addresses of other people involved in the organization is not very widespread: only 40% of the websites provide the email of the webmaster; 31% the email of other people/departments within the organization and 14% the email of the responsible for international relations.

Research on unconventional (but also conventional) political participation has stressed that the organization of supranational protest has very high transaction costs. This explains, amongst other factors, why, although competencies increase at the international level, protest remains mainly national, if not local. However, the Internet has substantially reduced the cost of communicating with large numbers of individuals spread all around the globe. Connected rapidly and cheaply by the Net, networks of activists and increasing numbers of global organizations have worked together in Seattle, Genoa, Porto Alegre, Florence, Paris, etc. The Internet has not only been considered as an instrument for more democratic and open forms of communication but also as an instrument for offline and online mobilization. The websites of our organizations perform this function to very different degrees. More than 60% of the organizations publish online their action calendar. One third publishes also the action calendar of other organizations and provides concrete
information (through manuals or links to useful resources) on offline forms of action. Between 15% and 21% organize workshops and helping desks to socialize people to offline forms of action. One fifth of the analyzed websites (22%) provide information on laboratories/courses/workshop on offline forms of action; about one third (36%) diffuse information about offline action, and as many as two thirds of our websites contain information on the participation of the organization in protest campaigns.

The Internet is also an instrument of protest used for online mobilization and performing acts of dissent. Examples include online petitions, netstrikes and mailbombings. In our websites, online forms of actions are less promoted than offline ones: the online petition is used by almost 30% of the analyzed websites; 15% of them publish on the website concrete information on online forms of actions. Calls for netstrikes and/or mailbombings are quite rare.

To which extent the Internet allows to mobilize different groups of the population, especially the least “technologically educated” is an open question, often discussed in the literature on Internet and protest. The digital divide (or unequal access to new technologies) is strictly related with democracy—and especially a concern for participatory models of democracy--since it concerns both the access to the Internet and the skills in using electronic applications. In our research, we considered the offer of some electronic resources as indicators of the attention paid by social movement organizations to reducing the digital divide. The organizations we selected for our analysis appear not very concerned with this issue. In fact, less than 10% provide laboratories, help desks and other electronic applications to socialize their users to the use of the Internet. Only 5% offer free email to their users and 8% host webpages or websites.

In conclusion, the Internet is considered as an important resource for social movement communication and mobilization. Cheap and fast communication especially facilitates the development of large, transnational and trans-issue networks. On the net, information can be published on the organizational life but also on their main concerns and proposals. Beyond its instrumental functions, the Internet is also a resource that can help the building of collective identities and improve deliberative forms of democracy. Our research indicates that social movement organizations vary in their strategies of use of the Internet. While more formal and larger organizations seem to invest more in the online publication of information, smaller and less formal groups tend to focus on more innovative use of the net, including online forms of protest.