Media and Protests: The Utilisation of Communication Technologies by Environmental Movements

Liam Leonard
National University of Ireland, Galway

Media and Protests:
The Utilisation of Communication Technologies by Environmental Movements

Liam Leonard, PhD, is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science and Sociology/ Environmental Change Institute at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

Liam Leonard

Introduction

A notable feature of the recent political landscape has been the increasing incidents of confrontation between grassroots and elites. These conflicts have occurred in the wake of the declining relevance of the traditional left-right dichotomy, and have been exemplified by the campaigns of opposition led by environmental groups against the globalised corporate sector. This article will examine how new forms of political expression may arise from the environmental movements' utilisation of the new technologies of communication as a strategic tool in their campaigns of protest. The use of internet and media technologies by environmental groups has facilitated the growth of a network of committed activists, who provide scientific and technological expertise to like-minded protests around the globe. By exploring movement use of media and internet technologies, this paper will outline new approaches taken by grassroots groups as part of their resistance to corporate and institutional actors. The spread of environmental protest in Ireland through the increased use of communications technologies will be examined in regard to the Galway for a Safe Environment (GSE) anti-incinerator group. GSE's ability to utilise internet technologies to forge links with global anti-toxics movements will provide evidence of the extensive nature of the links available to grassroots groups who embrace cyberprotest as a tool of protest.

The paper will explore the manner in which communication technologies enhance protest movements by providing leverage and influence for grassroots groups in an era characterised by knowledge flows and technocratic expertise. Internet linkages facilitate innovative approaches to political opportunity structures for movements through emergent features of cyberprotest that create a new nexus of capabilities in a globalised age. The 'repertoires and cycles of protest' (Della Porta and Diani, 1999) of new social movements have come to be underpinned by the onset of interactive knowledge flows, networked alliances, improved tactical approaches and advanced mobilisational capabilities through the development of cyber protest strategies.

Use of internet technologies

The use of internet technology as a basis for support between disparate protest groups is strategically augmented by the utilisation of media networks eager for a steady supply of presentable items on potential ecological crises for their ceaseless broadcasts. The information highway has become a vehicle for the dissemination of the various components of the environmental movement: academic and scientific expertise, political strategies, legal frameworks and the location of globalised support networks. By facilitating the spread of information which enhances campaigns of protest, the new technologies of communication have become a vital tool in the arsenal of the environmental movements globally.

Castells defines internet technologies as a 'privileged tool for acting, informing, recruiting, organising and counter-dominating' (2001: 137). Through the application of communication technologies, localised environmental movements can link with similar groups on a global basis, learning from the hard earned experiences of previous campaigns. This has transformed the once isolated pockets of environmental resistance into a world-wide movement able to challenge transnational corporate polluters, in the place of regional campaigns of resistance. The increasing reliance on communication technologies by environmental groups has seen a transformation in activists' profiles; changing from the politically dogmatic campaigner to that of a media-friendly professional with a high level of expertise in a related field. This use of expertise has created what Castells has called 'the new dynamics of social movements' (2001: 138).

Mobilisation of social movements

While internet sabotage from computer 'hackers' is an established strategy of the politics of the information age, it is the ability of social movements to mobilise and communicate through information technologies which provides a degree of dynamic innovation to the politics of protest. The internet has become the activists' meeting house in the information era. Networks of opposition have been established and continue to reinforce protests globally, with such success that industries and institutions are now attempting to restructure their own practices in response to the new cultural and political expression of environmental values. This process of redefining cultural values has traditionally been part of old social movement agendas, however, internet technologies make this redefinition or reinterpretation of values much easier for relevant movements today.

This shift in social movement capabilities can be seen in the transition of protest groups from a reactive force for change within a dominant ideological paradigm to that of a cultural movement which can set the campaign agendas as witnessed in the ability of Greenpeace to influence public perceptions of the environment. In turn, old political conflicts can have their overall boundaries redrawn in this era of communication technologies, as cultural values are redefined through information flows. In this way, old political values (and conflicts) can be resurrected through a campaign based on communication of new perspectives.

The restructuring of political and cultural values through the technologies of communication has become an important strategy for social movements in their campaigns of action. It is what Castells refers to as 'mobilisation around meaning' (2001: 140). The importance of new political understandings of meanings becomes evident in relation to the crisis of legitimation facing democratic politics. As mainstream politics veers towards a centrist, liberal democratic monolith, radical political expression has adopted new organisational forms, with traditional hierarchies replaced by internet links which can give equal voice to a multitude of concerned activists, each able to give as much or as little to a campaign as internet technology allows.

Furthermore, social movements' campaigns are now structured around the technologies of communication. The medium can affect the message, and often shape it. For instance, a movement's success or failure may be based on media depictions of certain aspects of a campaign, rather than being perceived on any subsequent outcome. Public attitudes are swayed by media images, such as Greenpeace running a flotilla in the Irish Sea, alongside ships carrying a nuclear cargo for British Nuclear Fuels. Resolution to the vexed question of nuclear power is not the expected outcome of this form of protest. However, Greenpeace gains a large amount of public support for their movement from the transmission of these images. Ultimately, the media is utilised to create transferable emotiveness around a political event, through the creation of a moral frame.

The link between internet mobilisation of protests and satellite news coverage is evident from the events surrounding the Seattle and Genoa anti-globalisation protests. These protests and the massive publicity they received from global media networks has elevated protest to a new level, giving symbolic meanings and outlets for political expression to a new generation of activists. Issues of significance for young people, such as anti-corporatism or environmentalism, can now be forced on to the agendas of powerful groups such as the G7, with an immediacy that by-passes the slow and cumbersome cycle of parliamentary elections. The immediacy of internet communications increases the spontaneous nature of protest events, making them at once attractive to both the casual activist and the media networks which follow these events.

The emergence of global networks of disaffected young people has enhanced the anti-globalisation movement's ability to mobilise campaigns of protest. Throughout the last decade a new generation of politically motivated activists with advanced networking capabilities has become part of the discourse of new millennium politics, as characterised by 'McLibel' and Montsanto anti-corporate campaigns (Klein, 2000). Communication technologies are a central component of consumer activism that targets sweatshop production by Nike or unsustainable modes of transport such as SUVs. Cyber protesters can challenge multinationals that are now recognised as 'the most powerful political forces of our time' (Klein, 2000).

For protest movements, the internet allows for a strategic diversity which prevents such movements from becoming stifled by drawn-out campaigns which can sap morale. Through communication technologies, the battleground for protests can be shifted at the press of a keyboard button. This immediacy gives protest movements the ability to link and mobilise with key allies globally. Key events are utilised as mobilisation strategies, resulting in the expansion of democratic deficit and moral frames through the filter of any ensuing media coverage. An example of this can be seen in the events around the 2002 'Reclaim the Streets' protest in Dublin. As the police response to the actual march was severe, the media coverage and public outcry about police actions on the day led to a prolongment of the event's salience with the media.

The ability to challenge globalised networks or power by protest movements has become an important aspect of the politics of the new century. As traditional institutions are increasingly redundant, new equations of power pit grassroots protest movements against the globalised industrial-military complex. Communication technologies, once the preserve of the latter, have become the weapon of choice for the former. Strategically, the mobilisation, coordination and publicity needed for protest movements at a global level can only be achieved through communication networks. What becomes clear from an analysis of how protest movements utilise communication technologies is the increasing importance of these new forms of technology as a tool for spreading information and organising resistance. The new technologies of communication ultimately create a platform for forms of political resistance which can respond to the needs of concerned citizens in an increasingly globalised world.

The centrality of the media

Essentially, the strategic impact new media forms have had on protest movements has been based on a movement's ability to influence overall media agendas. The ratings potential of protest coverage is dependent on two main themes: the message of the movement, and the potential for an attention-grabbing media event emanating from that movement's activities.

Therefore, the subject of movement salience becomes a critical aspect of how media attention is maintained. According to Dearing and Rogers (1988), there are three main features in the issue maximisation process. These are part of an agenda building

structure which incorporates factors such as feeding the insatiable appetites of communications elites such as multimedia corporations through the provision of movement events which embrace the spectacular, and a coordination of media, public and policy agendas. This fusion of demand, expectation and need shapes wider understandings of the contentious social events which will maintain public attention, as well as viewer ratings.

A central feature of this analysis is the importance of the issue in the context of social expectations. Issue salience is achieved through extensive media coverage, but the issues can only be ignited into activism through the intervention of movement entrepreneurs or gatekeepers. Issue importance is maintained by 'public' and 'policy agenda setting' (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). From this perspective, policy response to an issue is dependent on the importance such an issue is granted by public and media agendas. In this way, successful outcomes to social movement activity are demonstrated to be increasingly reliant on that movement's ability to influence professional media elites, in addition to provoking a public response to their issue of concern. Subsequently, the media's role in a new political equation, as a filter for conflicts between grassroots and elites, becomes a crucial aspect of the new political dynamic.

A further understanding of the centrality of media to the grassroots movements can be achieved through an analysis of what has been termed the 'editorial gatekeeper'. It is the role of such gatekeepers to decide what events in society are noteworthy enough to feature on front page or primetime news reports. Their importance to a grassroots movement in need of public support is paramount, far exceeding policy makers or other members of the bureaucratic elite. While political disputes still require the exchange of views from adversarial groups, the influence of media on the public perception of that dispute ultimately influences the outcome of political contestations.

What becomes evident from this analysis is the importance of media advocacy and editorial support for grassroots movements to gain leverage. In response to this challenge, movements have achieved a greater degree of media professionalism, combined with technological expertise. As the influence of advertisers increases, media coverage and subsequent editorial support can be effectively driven or censored by commercial demand. Another form of external pressure applied to media has been demonstrated by the US government's determined steering of the military action taken in Iraq in 2003. In a new departure for war coverage, journalists were embedded with various regiments across the field of operations. Open criticism of the war led to public accusations of unpatriotic behaviour, and even treachery.

Invariably, the media's coverage of social events can be shaped by an underlying ideological perspective. The meanings of societal disputes around topics such as environmental or human rights, are subject to an ideologically based conflict of definition. Here again, the media play a central role, ordaining the public perception of social issues, which is flavoured by inherent ideological demands. One result of this shift in social perception has seen an increased cultural significance of the aesthetics of political disputes, as demonstrated in the campaign of Greenpeace against the French and UK nuclear industries. A further demonstration of the cultural significance of political media coverage can be gleaned from a study of the anti-globalisation phenomenon. This movement has drawn the lines of demarcation clearly, between a grassroots coalition of environmentalists and pacifists, and the formal institutions of global power, such as the G7 and IMF. In this way, the anti-globalisation movement allows potential activists the widest definition to associate themselves with certain pro-environment and anti-war sentiments with which many people feel some form of empathy. As a result, media coverage is guaranteed as a mass-mobilisation of a broad range of groups from academics to anarchists provides the potential for a 'media event', the focus of which is readily provided by the heavy-handed response of local security forces.

The Galway for a Safe Environment campaign

From an Irish perspective, the utilisation of media and internet has become a central feature of the recent anti-incineration protests in the West of Ireland, undertaken by the Galway for a Safe Environment (GSE) group. One of the most interesting aspects of GSE's campaign was their utilisation of internet technology and expertise to propagate their position on the potential health risks posed by incineration. By utilising information such as the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 2000 report on the dangers of dioxins from incineration, which was accessed from the internet, GSE were able to transfer information through what Castells (1996) has called 'global computer-mediated communication (CMC)', in order to influence Irish media reports on the incineration debate. A GSE committee member discussed this point in the course of an interview:

> The internet has had a big impact on this and other environmental campaigns. A good example of this is that on the day the US EPA report was released, we were able to have it from the front page of the Washington Times that morning … hearing about this at one o'clock (Irish time), to getting Dr. Paul Connet on the Six One news, through internet connection … It's remarkable that the consultants involved in the Galway Waste Plan have a highly paid PR firm working for them, and yet, I'd say without beating our own drum, that we've beaten them hands down in the local media (O'Bradaigh, 2000).

GSE has been successful in its utilisation of both local and national media in regards to getting across its side of the incineration debate. Committee members maintain that a run of well received television appearances, particularly one where they debated the incinerator issue with former Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, were successful, due to their ability to present expertly sourced information, which allowed journalists to trust their perspective on the issue. This strategy was based on 'contacts and other campaigns', where GSE picked up on the maxim: 'Source everything you use. If you can't source it, don't say it' (Leonard, 2005).

What surprised GSE, and aided its campaign, was that 'the consultants didn't adopt the same standards, and tended to throw sweeping statements' (Leonard, 2005). From this, the local print media began to show editorial support for GSE's campaign, despite a history of hostility to anti-ecoprotest positions during previous campaigns such as the divisive anti-sewage-treatment plant campaign in Galway during the early 1990's. This challenging of one form of 'expertise', that of the paid consultant, by another, that of a protest group armed with good information and the internet, has led to the rise in a new form of social movement expert, the 'incident entrepreneur' (Della Porta and Diani,1999), which in turn has facilitated new levels of professionalism among the environmental lobby.

The significance of advocacy researchers for protest movements is highlighted in the following passage from an interview with a GSE committee member:

> The day has gone when highly paid consultants can come into a community and tell them … that this is perfectly safe. I mean, it took one of our neighbours, a librarian, to find in five minutes on the internet, a great number of highly damaging facts in recent scientific publications. These articles gave a lie to what the consultants were telling us (Ó Brádaigh, 2005).

New form of politics

GSE's campaign is representative of a global phenomenon of protests against corporate actors reinforced by the utilisation of media and information technologies, as well as expertise garnered from establishment sources but used for anti-establishment purposes. This use of establishment sources, such as GSE's use of the US EPA report, is both a result of and part of the process of overcoming national boundaries and embracing a global definition of these issues. As global networks are formed and information and technology shared, the role of community protestors has been transformed. What GSE's campaign has shown is that highly skilled and informed groups of protestors can outflank both government authorities and private consultants, leaving environmental disputes to be contested in the field of media primetime and internet cyberspace.

This represents a problem for both the public governance and the private corporate sectors, as environmental movements move away from social movement campaigns of extreme actions or violent protest, (despite the actions of a relative minority in Seattle and Genoa) and instead present themselves as alternative-minded, environmentally conscious NGOs with a laptop in one hand, and a protest placard in the other. Where once violence from social and environmental movements, at protests or otherwise, gave authorities the excuse to respond with the strong arm of the state's military and police apparatus, such repression by the state can be avoided by technologically driven protests.

This avoidance of direct confrontation between protestors and the authorities on the streets or at the site of environmental dispute allows for a broader public empathy with the protest movements aims. Furthermore, this strategy of utilising technologies and expertise gives protest movements an air of respectability, which belies their anti-establishment motives, while crucially allowing for increased media access. Indeed, this strategy has become a feature of media processes, as the use of sourced information, conveyed by state of the art information and communication technologies, has become a central part of both journalistic and editorial news gathering.

This form of political expression through technology utilisation has evolved from the unease felt by local communities in the face of the loss of powers at local and national governmental levels, and the rise in multinational globalisation. As the power of the nation state recedes, communities are utilising the new technologies of the information age, and combining them with specialised areas of expertise, to directly oppose corporate entities or toxic industries.

Theoretically, GSE's campaign represents a new form of protest, one which differs from previous environmental disputes in Ireland. Essentially, GSE can be seen as part of what Castells (1996) had described as 'an array of transnational social forces animated by environmental concerns' rather than a protest group rooted in either NIMBY [Not In My Back Yard] politics or deep green ideology. As such, the GSE campaign can be linked to a worldwide anti-corporate movement which, while having environmental concern as a basis for their thinking, has as much to do with addressing the onset of risk society and democratic deficit as any emergent eco-consciousness.

In the Irish case, this crisis is represented by the onset of a consumer society and a reliance on multinational investment that has led to industrial pollution and a waste crisis for society. Despite an increased economic output, many communities in Ireland have begun to experience a sense of alienation from this 'Celtic Tiger' economy, as multinationals have imposed on both the environment and quality of life of many citizens.

The political processes, both in Ireland and internationally, have been altered to meet the demands of this new form of politics. As the campaign of GSE has shown, this new form of politics is based on both the fears of local communities in the face of the growing

power of the multinational waste management sector (of which the incineration industry is but one component) and a growing democratic deficit presented by the weakness of the state in responding to its citizens' fears and needs in regard to both waste management and the subsequent health risks it may pose. Ultimately, the citizenry has responded to this challenge through protest movements, circumventing established political channels, and turning the new technologies of the corporate sector on the corporations, to oppose environmental degradation. When viewed from an international perspective, this new movement of political resistance has become both an important arena for political expression, and a new form of political action.

References

Allen, R. and Jones, T. (1990) *Guests of the Nation.* Earthscan.

Castells, M. (1996) *The Information Age: Economy, Society, Culture.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (2000) *The Rise of the Network Society.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (2001) *The Internet Galaxy. Reflections on the Internet.* Oxford: UP.

Crossley, N. (2002) *Making Sense of Social Movements.* London: Routledge.

Dearing, J. and Rogers, E. (1996) *Agenda-Setting.* London: Sage.

Della Porta, D. and Diani, M. (1999) *Social Movements: an Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Klein, N. (2000) *No Logo.* London: Harper Collins.

Leonard, L. (2005) *Politics Enflamed: GSE and the Campaign against Incineration in Ireland.* Greenhouse Press Ecopolitics Series 1. Drogheda: Choice.

Jordan, T. (1999) *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet.* London: Routledge.

O'Bradaigh, C. (2000) Interview on 21 May, 2000. (GSE Spokesperson).

Sadar, Z. and Navetz, J. (1996) *Cyberfutures: Culture and Politics in the Information Superhighway.* New York: University Press.