Chapter 15

Exploring Internet and Politics: E–Mailing Lists as Political Spaces for Social Movements

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has largely been greeted as a technology able to create new spaces of political debate. In order to investigate the issue, scholars have paid attention to how transnational social movements use new information technologies. This has been done mainly exploring the use of the World Wide Web (WWW). However, new political spaces do not take place just on the WWW, and by consequence, research in this field cannot solely carry out Web analysis to explore the role played by the Internet in creating political debate. In looking at other areas of the Internet to understand the creation of new political space, other analytical approaches need to be adopted. The Internet also includes tools other than the WWW, such as E–Mailing Lists, Social Networks tools, Peer-to-Peer Networks, Instant Messaging tools, and so forth. This paper explores the role that E–Mailing Lists play in creating new political spaces. To explore if and how this happens, the author illustrates this crucial point with an analysis of the use of E–Mailing Lists by social movements. The case used is that of the organization of the protest during the G8 Summit held in Genoa in July 2001.

NET METHODOLOGIES

Although public use of the Internet is a considerably recent event, we are already beginning to understand its concrete influence on politics. As Sey and Castells (2004) observed, its influence is no longer proclaimed as fate but established by observation. Thanks to the extensive research so far produced, we are far more enlightened on the issue today. Scholars have explored whether and how the Internet can increase political participation (Norris, 2001; Katz & Rice, 2002), and the role it plays in facilitating processes of governance (Alvarez & Hall, 2008; Gibson & Ward, 2009; Van Dijk & Hacker, 2000; Trechsel, Mendez, Schmitter, & Kies, 2003). We know what a powerful instrument Internet is for local political expression outside the formal political system.
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(Bimber, 1998; Hague & Loader, 1999), and are aware of the opportunities that the Internet offers social movements (Bennett, 2003; Della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Diani, 2001; Juris, 2008).

People construct the use of a technology depending on the context in which they act. In the political domain, political specificities, such as the nature of political actors and the democratic status of the country in which people use the Internet, are determinant in explaining the unequal influence of the Internet on politics (Calderaro, 2010a). In order to explore how the Internet fits into the political activities of social movements, researchers use different empirical tools such as web site analysis (Norris, 2001; Della Porta & Mosca, 2005), hyperlink analysis (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004) and issue crawling (Rogers, 2004). While these methodologies differ by the goals for which they are used, they have a common point. They explore only the WWW.

This is because it is commonly assumed that the WWW plays a role in spreading information and the claims of political groups. It is the channel of communication through which political communities provide information about their activities and make public their positions on specific topics. Thus, to explore the WWW is useful in order to understand how social movements use the Internet to create their own channel of communication (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005). In most cases, the WWW hosts information on how social movements use the Internet as a platform facilitating the coordination for protest events. Moreover, to explore the website of a political community is useful for collecting information on its identity and obtaining the political contents published there.

The Internet has been welcomed also for its potential to develop political communities. However, this is why focusing only on the WWW is not enough. The weakness of this approach is that it does not provide information on the use of new technologies in political communities. Rather, the political community is made up of continual interaction and debate, which today is influenced by network-based technologies as well.

In this regard, Kavada (2009) stresses how the: “empirical evidence connecting the movement’s decentralized architecture with its use of the internet is relatively scarce. This gap is compounded by a more general lack of research in the internal processes of social movements” (p.199). The cause of this lack may be explained by the fact that, such as highlighted by Polletta (2002), “Our failure to tackle these questions reflects our inclination to see organizations as actors rather than as made up of actors and their interactions” (p. 225). The impact of new technologies on political communities involves also facilitating these internal interactions. As Castells (2004) points out, the culture of the network society, including social movements, is not made of content but of process. Indeed, digital technologies make this a network-based process. Some political communities are particularly engaged in debating and testing new forms of interaction through the Internet. One of the aims of their political activities is to fit the digital instruments into the internal processes in order to strengthen their democratic condition. A significant example is the independent media network, Indymedia (http://www.indymedia.org).

It is a misunderstanding to think that the main aim of the project is to provide information. Rather, the production and the publication of information is the main instrument through which to reach the primary goal, that of strengthening democratic deliberative processes via the use of new technologies for the coordination of the community.

These considerations stress the fact that, in order to explore the impact of the Internet on social movements, it is also important to bring light on the use of the Internet by political communities for internal communication and organization. This leads us to conclude that to explore only the WWW is inappropriate if the research questions are: what is the role of the Internet within political communities? What is the role of the Internet in the political process of the political communities? Does the Internet facilitate internal communication?
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