Social Movements and Online Civic Engagement

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Abstract:
Recent developments in the field of activism have led to renewed claims about the potential role of the Internet for the proliferation of social movements. In a parallel development, new forms of civic engagement are emerging online, raising hopes for the renewal of citizenship within liberal democracies. It is argued that cyberspace creates opportunities for social movements to open up and become more effective, while at the same time posing challenges in terms of management, control, leadership and longevity. Similarly, through a variety of avenues online tools of civic engagement can empower citizens who have not been able to express their voice in the mass-mediated public sphere, while at the same time raising serious questions of legitimacy, fairness and accountability.

A conceptual model is proposed for the better understanding of online civic engagement; it is based on a distinction amongst four expressions of engagement: awareness, deliberation, mobilisation and conflict. The dynamics within and between those categories can facilitate our understanding of the interaction between individuals and groups, and between social movements and their environment.

Finally, using the 2nd Gulf War as a case study, primary and secondary evidence is examined; the data demonstrate the increasing and flexible use of new information and communication technologies by anti-war activists. Findings on mobilisation tools and strategies, on the salience of the ‘old’ media as a public opinion gatekeeper, and on emerging patterns of empowerment and conflict concur with the relevant literature.

Overall, there appears to be a tension between primarily online activities ‘baptised’ in cyberculture and more conventional activism within offline/specific local communities. For normative and practical reasons, online civic engagement and social movement activism cannot contribute to democratic politics unless they are defined by a commonly accepted set of rules and a geographically defined community. This is particularly important (and difficult) in the fluid post-9/11 global and virtual environment.

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Following the academic 'battle' between utopians and dystopians in the 1980s and early 1990s regarding the overall value of the internet's effect on democracy (see Fisher and Wright 2001) - obviously presupposing that there was an effect in the first place - an influential narrative of reinforcement emerged at the turn of the millennium based upon a rush of empirical studies (e.g. Norris 2001, Hill and Hughes 1998; for a review of that debate see Gerodimos 2004b). However, the rise of cyberactivism has provided scholars with clear signs of change in the practice of civic engagement. Regardless of whether that change is an expression of pre-existing socio-cultural or psychological patterns (as supporters of the reinforcement thesis would argue), or whether it is due to a dynamic, dialectical relationship between human agencies and technological means (Poster 1999), it is now widely accepted that the outcome of this process is - at least - a move towards the politics of 'accelerated pluralism' (Bimber 1998). That involves the rapid proliferation of single-issue groups and ad hoc mobilisation for the duration of a campaign. It would also imply the move towards less coherent / looser movements, with reduced control by the centre and a decline in the importance of individual leaders.

The shift towards a faster, more inclusive but also segmented and issue-based political process and the abundance of information and contacts provided by the new network structures raises a host of issues at several levels:

- how do groups and individuals use the new technologies to learn about and mobilise around issues; do the new tools constitute a threat for traditional methods and tactics of political communication; and what is the impact on the role and organisation of social movements;
- does the move to a more pluralistic politics mean that other key democratic elements (such as equality, representation and deliberation) will be 'worse off' in the new environment;
- does the facilitation of participation via interest groups and online movements mean that more (and different) people will now take part in the political process; is there a new civic culture developing online, for instance amongst younger generations, and if so how does it compare / contrast to nation-state-based forms of citizenship;
- will people polarise around inflexible and dogmatic opposites leading to more conflict rather than dialogue.

This paper aims to:
(a) progress the debate on online civic engagement and social movements by identifying some of the key emergent questions
(b) present a simple but theoretically informed typology that may assist our understanding of online engagement
(c) offer tentative answers based on primary and secondary evidence

The Interaction of Social Movements and Cyberspace

In order to demonstrate why new information and communication technologies do not have an original effect on democracy, Bimber (1998) argues that there are barriers of willingness (costs of collective action) and capacity (in terms of political cognition) that hinder any qualitative effect of the Internet on mobilisation. In other words, even if the means for greater civic participation exist, people's capacity to learn about issues and be involved with relevant initiatives is finite. Yet, although that may be true for the majority of the population, online empowerment of marginal voices and the intensification of polarised campaigning could have a knock-on (original and qualitative) effect on the practice of democratic politics.

Still, one of the main arguments of the reinforcement paradigm is the so-called 'normalisation' thesis, which predicts that as access to, and use of, the Internet spreads amongst the population any effects that were apparent in the first years will be ameliorated
by the political and cultural tendencies of the mainstream majority, and therefore the medium will take up its "normal" function next to the old/mass media (which went through this process during the first decade of their life). Hill and Hughes (1998) argue that instead of the internet transforming society, society will change the internet. Lievrow (2004) mentions three signs of normalisation: slowing technological change, rise in commercialisation (ownership and supply), and rise in consumerism (demand).

Again, the problem with the normalisation thesis is its presumption that online access and participation *equals* the zero-sum game of empowerment, whereby the relative increase in the numbers of moderate/mainstream/pro-systemic citizens/consumers equals the respective decline in the resources (i.e. disempowerment) of non-mainstream groups and individuals. For example, if there was evidence of egalitarian and self-regulating use of discussion fora during the 1980s/90s (e.g. Usenet) or of increased political motivation and awareness amongst internet users (due to the skew in the background of online citizens because of the digital divide), these effects will be normalised once more and more "normal"/average people start occupying cyberspace. However, that has yet to be proven. Indeed it is very difficult to do so, because supporters of 'normalisation' treat cyberspace and mass-mediated space as two things of the same order. However, whereas in the mass media airtime, paper, ink and radio waves are finite (in which case one's gain is another's loss), cyberspace is apparently infinite. The rise of mainstream sources online (such as well-established news organisations) could well mean the decline of non-mainstream sources in relative *quantitative* terms (as a percentage of the internet sites / population). But it has not been proved yet whether it will also mean the decline of, say, extremist sources in terms of quality of impact.

The existence of the power law distribution (also known as the Pareto Law or Zipf) in cyberspace has been widely discussed and accepted, as in every other application of life (see Shirky 2003). That is to say, as the number of websites, weblogs, producers, messages or sources increases, due to power laws a few of those sources will attract a disproportionate amount of attention by the users. For example Schneider (1996) found consistent patterns of inequality of participation amongst users of Usenet message boards. There is a strong argument to be made then in favour of reinforcement, in that the *criteria* by which those sources 'survive' will tend to be socio-culturally determined. In the mass-mediated national public sphere the cultural values of celebrity / fame, economic well-being and law-obedience tend to be reproduced through the output of that public discussion (given also issues of political economy and industry structure).

However, cyberculture should be treated as a culture in its own merit, breeding its own values. More importantly, as Poster (1999) notes, "[t]he Internet is becoming a paranational culture that combines global connectivity with local specificity, a "glocal" phenomenon that seems to resist national political agendas and to befuddle national political leaderships". Therefore, were one to follow the socio-cultural constructivist approach they would also have to take into account the mismatch between national boundaries and cyberspace. That practically means that the criteria by which the elites will be formed online *may* be different from the offline ones, which levels the playing field for minority viewpoints and marginal movements (although cf. Levy 2004).

Indeed, other scholars would go as far as to say that the medium is changing the nature/expression of social movements themselves. Bennett (2003: 150) argues that the "absence of ideological integration, clear collective identity framing, and strong organizational leadership reflect important degrees of organization via communication systems" rather than mere reinforcement of existing organisation patterns. Blood (2000) refers to a wholly new type of activism, 'micro-activism', which is transforming the political basis of activism by shifting the focus to an anti-corporate agenda through high-profile, decentralised "strikes".

Blood's distinction between well-established activist organisations, such as Greenpeace, and other more dynamic/flexible micro-activist groups is essentially based upon differences in resource mobilisation strategies, with some social movement organisations focusing on
professional resources and others on more participatory resources (Diani 2000). The argument is that although the internet has enhanced mobilisation for the former (e.g. through the facilitation of fund-raising online), it has *revolutionised* mobilisation for the latter precisely because of the anachronic nature of both the medium and of the movements themselves. This is also known as the 'rhizomatic' nature of online movements because of their free-willing and amorphous structure (Karatzogianni 2004b). Thus, online social movements in the 21st century are expected to present variations not only amongst them, but also *within* them given that they will act more as broad coalitions of subgroups, rather than tightly-knit bodies. Rucht and Neidhardt (2002: 24) predict that such "wave like mobilizations... will very likely vary according to biographical characteristics, gender-specific features and consciously chosen affiliations, and they will be only loosely connected to each other".

Following that observation there are two issues of particular importance that need to be addressed: the first is the effect of accelerated and pluralistic mobilisation on the collective identity and leadership of 21st century social movements; the second one is the use and role of 'old'/mass media in group mobilisation [the role of the media for civic awareness is addressed in the typology below] and the relationship of online groups with the offline world (although the distinction between online and offline is becoming increasingly problematic). Those two issues are interconnected because they both ultimately relate to the access and potential impact of emerging social movements onto the broader public opinion.

It is precisely because of the opening up of social movements via the new network structures to groups and individuals not traditionally associated with activism or active participation that the basis and nature of collective action may be affected. Postmes and Burnsting (2002) argue that the Internet may be changing the *motives* behind mobilisation. The notion of collective identity has been widely proposed as one of the key stimuli behind effective social movements (see McCaughey and Ayers 2003) and, due to socio-psychological factors, the role of the leader or other easily identifiable individuals is paramount for the long-term establishment of a movement. The mass public is used to identifying specific initiatives, policies and reactions with specific individuals; the roles, attitudes and perceptions of those individuals in party politics have become considerably more significant during the last few decades as the links between the cultural and the political sphere become clearer. Therefore, the rhizomatic and ad-hoc nature of emerging online movements casts a doubt on the capacity of such initiatives to take a long-term position within the limelight of mass politics.

Furthermore, the role of 'old' media in the process of collective action may be understated by recent arguments regarding the rise of online activism. There is no doubt that the boundaries between online and offline activities are becoming increasingly eroded, with major moral, political and epistemological consequences (Bimber 2000). Postmes and Burnsting (2002: 294) argue that “the Internet affords movements and activists the powers of mass communication”, yet that is not necessarily through a direct relationship (internet communicators to mass audience). An important question for further examination is the salient role of the old media as gatekeepers of the mass public opinion. Surely new information and communication technologies assist groups and activists in organising creative and impressive ‘events’ (such as flash-mobbing) but it could be argued that the Internet is not automatically and *in itself* a mass medium; that it needs the interaction with established mass media so as to draw attention to specific websites or initiatives; and that the ultimate success of the latter depends on entering the news cycle through satisfying the appetite of well-established news organisations for traditional news values.

A final point relating to issues of identity and magnitude of online movements is whether links and bases in specific offline communities are necessary. A number of scholars (e.g. Diani 2000) have implied that virtual networks work best when they are based upon 'real-world' ones. It would be naïve to deny the primary social and professional networking occurring online; but despite of the fusion between online and offline (or even *because of*
that fusion) the impact and effectiveness of an exclusively virtual movement, network or group may be limited unless it is rooted in a more inclusive, finite community.

Therefore, although the “counter-public sphere” of cyberspace (Downey and Fenton 2003) is not a mere continuation of the mass-mediated public sphere, and there is a clear tension in terms of views, discourses and virtual/geographical boundaries, the ultimate success and overall impact of online movements depends on loci of support in the “real” world and also on the attention and response of the mass mediated public sphere.

These elements are vital to our understanding of emerging patterns of online civic engagement; it would be misleading to describe or predict the replication of offline engagement patterns in the online world. As Myers (1994: 252) notes, "[b]ecause it is the collective nature of social movements that separates them from other types of human activity, any technology that changes the collective character of a movement has important ramifications for the process and effect of social movements". In that sense both paradigms are in a way correct: mobilisation is revolutionised and spread via the internet; yet, that impact is countered by socio-psychological and cultural barriers (such as limited capacity) and side-effects such as the lack of strong leadership, centralised control and integrated access to the public opinion. The apparent result is neither a copycat model of offline politics, as some theorists would have it, nor a radically different mode of politics, but a negotiation of new techniques and applications with existing motivations and resources.

Civic Engagement: Empowerment versus Polarisation

Most of the accounts examining the interaction of new technologies and old processes have as a starting point the alleged crisis of legitimacy facing contemporary liberal democracies (expressed through declining voter turnouts, civic disengagement and mistrust towards institutions and politicians). Advocating the use of emerging tools for greater civic participation and referring to the successful experiment of Minnesota E-Democracy, Clift (1998) argues that “we are experiencing a convergence of democratic institutions and processes with the Internet. Democracy is online... [The] evolution toward interaction is essential for full realization of the potential of existing and future Internet tools to promote greater public participation in government”.

Yet, as if the empirical dispute about the means of change, i.e. the relationship between technology, politics and culture, were not enough, the end product itself, i.e. the normative starting point of the discussion is far from settled. It has been argued elsewhere that unqualified trust towards the political process is not something we should be striving for (Gerodimos 2004a). Given the amount of negative information that rightly or wrongly is communicated about politicians, institutions and processes, and also given the emergent gap between patterns of multi-level governance and national/populist citizenship, it is only natural and healthy that citizens should be sceptical.

Fiorina takes this argument (quite) further by arguing that (a) there has actually been a rise in civic engagement (in the US) during the last decades and that (b) that rise is a negative thing.

"I am doubtful that the relationship between civic engagement and social welfare is generally positive. For present purposes we can stipulate that high levels of civic engagements are optimal, but I think that intermediate levels of civic engagement may well lead to outcomes that are inferior not just to outcomes produced by higher levels of civic engagement but also to those produced by lower levels" (1999: 396)

The core of his argument is that partial engagement has empowered voices at the extremes, which in conjunction with an apathetic moderate majority has led to a polarised, confrontational and unrepresentative civic culture. In fact, taking the opposite line from those scholars that directly or indirectly see a parallel, spiral relationship between falling civic engagement and trust, especially amongst the young (e.g. Delli Carpini 2000, Putnam 2000), he concludes that “the rise in participatory democracy has contributed to the decline
in trust” (1999: 405). Essentially this is an argument against the populism allegedly facilitated by new technologies (e.g. online referenda etc).

Fiorina's argument is not new; it goes back to 18th and 19th century political thinkers such as Burke and Peel, to the elitist paradigm of political thought, and some would even argue to ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. Although one could agree with the abstract premise that unqualified and uneducated civic participation is potentially dangerous, it is very difficult (and arbitrary) to define an accepted level of qualified, educated and quantitatively representative/adequate engagement. Furthermore, it could be argued that it is not the fault of the (opinionated) minorities that participate and make the most of the existing system, but of the apathetic majorities (which would imply that they deserve the current systemic pathology).

Still, despite the implications and weaknesses of that argument, Fiorina's observation about the rise in polarisation and extremism is potentially very important. The same concerns have been expressed by proponents of deliberative democracy. For example Downey and Fenton (2003: 199) write that:

"Habermas's concern is that greater pluralism in terms of contacts and exchanges between networks may not lead to the expansion of an intersubjectively shared world, but rather to a greater fragmentation of civil society. Similarly, shared networks may offer a sense of solidarity at the click of a mouse but actual critical solidarity is by-passed. Obviously then, such networks become extremely problematic from the standpoint of discourse ethics and democratic culture. Greater pluralism may be regarded as a risk for deliberative democracy rather than its saviour”.

Similarly, Papacharissi (2002) mentions the possibility of a “false sense of empowerment” being created amongst users of virtual tools and forums. Therefore, it is not only the consequences of accelerated online pluralism on social movement organisation that are contested; the opportunity for greater civic empowerment and the challenge of further polarisation and segmentation of the public sphere seem to be going hand by hand. In order, then, to understand the normative basis and empirical expression of online civic engagement and its relationship with social movements we need to unpack that process into different stages.

**Mapping the Dynamics of Online Civic Engagement: a Four-Level Typology**

The taxonomy presented below does not claim to exhaust the issue of online civic engagement, but it attempts to facilitate our understanding of that practice by highlighting the contribution of four threads of literature in sequence: awareness, deliberation, mobilisation and conflict. Therefore a holistic approach of civic engagement online is followed that considers both ‘reflective’ and ‘active’ aspects of engagement. Although some of the categories mentioned below bear a similarity with Vegh’s (2003) classification of forms of online actions at the superficial level of labels (e.g. awareness and mobilisation are also mentioned in his typology), there are considerable differences in terms of delineating those activities. The most obvious one is the fact that Vegh focuses on persuasive activism, i.e. engagement with a purpose of achieving a pre-set target, whereas the analysis below extends to more initial stages of the engagement process such as awareness/education and deliberation, in the broad sense of dialogical and dialectical interaction. Overall, then, I treat engagement as an umbrella term that encompasses the entire spectrum of relevant activities.

**Level 1: Online Awareness**

In sequential terms, the very first expression of engagement with an issue or a cause coincides with one’s awareness of that matter. It is almost universally accepted that political education and information about all aspects of an issue are paramount so as to optimise decision-making. The basis of democracy is an informed and responsible citizenry and the basis of rational decision-making is the availability of maximum information about a
problem. In a mass, representative democracy this role is formally fulfilled by the education system and the media (the latter being considered as a “fourth estate”, with the term going back to Burke, see Underwood 2003).

Given a variety of weaknesses inherent to old media such as structural and cultural constraints (identified by critical theorists) and the apparent ability of new media to provide a “way out” of a constrained and mediated public sphere, scholars have recently examined the role of the internet in civic education and awareness. Overall, and from a review of the empirical evidence, it appears there are at least three potential channels for the generation of online awareness:

- a direct model via exposure to information online (which is similar to the exposure theory for newspapers and television)
- an indirect model via newspaper use: Althaus and Tewksbury (2000: 21) found that “use of the Web as a news source is positively related with reading newspapers”. Although the direction of that correlation is not fully confirmed, Chaffee and Kanihan (1997) found that newspaper use is positively correlated with political education. Therefore there could be a causal relationship amongst internet use, newspaper use and political education.
- an indirect model via elaboration due to interaction with others. Eveland (2004: 184) found that “discussion of politics and issues in the news appears to be positively related to being informed about political matters of all sorts, both at the state and national level” and this correlation is attributed not to motivation but to cognitive elaboration stemming before, during or after interaction with others. That last potential is particularly important for the internet’s role in raising civic awareness, given its nature as a locus of interpersonal (virtual) interaction due to the abundance of social and professional networks, spaces and discussion fora.

The significance of the internet’s role as a generator of awareness is not only because of the process, but perhaps primarily because of the content (although the latter needs the former in order to materialise). The availability of alternative information, news stories and viewpoints complementing the ones presented by traditional news sources has been discussed extensively. An additional form of awareness is that of self-awareness, whether that is for an individual (through the de/construction of one’s cyberself) or for a group. Using the concept of voice Mitra (2001: 33) argues that the emergence of marginal voices online “can lead to re-negotiation of marginal identities and the formation of significantly powerful cyber communities” that can then lead to a re-negotiation of power relations between dominant and marginal.

Hence, it is argued that the internet has an empowering role as a tool of awareness via the exposure to information and elaboration on argumentation, and as a stimulus for the re-negotiation of individual and collective identities.

Level 2: Online Deliberation

This category includes both the narrow definition of political discussion as part of the model of deliberative democracy, and the more flexible use of cyberspace for the generation of politically relevant social capital via informal social networks, dialectical interaction leading to awareness generation etc (for definitions and discussion of politically relevant social capital, the role of social networking and political socialisation see La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 1998). Gastill and Dillard (1999: 20) found evidence that clearly supported “the hypothesis that deliberative discussions of political issues can increase the sophistication of individuals’ political judgements”. Price, Cappella and Nir (2002: 95) concurred by finding that “exposure to disagreement does indeed contribute to people’s ability to generate reason, and in particular reasons why others might disagree with their own views”. Hence, the purpose of a deliberative space is to allow for critical and rational debate with the potential of reaching a consensus and with the purpose of informing decision-making and problem-solving.
Given the internet’s capacity for criticality and resistance (e.g. via the re-negotiation of power relations as was mentioned above), Poster (1995) argues that online communities may unwittingly be serving a function as a Habermasian public sphere. There is a growing literature on the deliberative functions of virtual spaces and the obstacles facing the realisation of a formalised new public sphere. One such potential threat would be homophily/segmentation, i.e. the tendency of individuals to seek and polarise around viewpoints they agree with, avoiding contact with and exposure to alternative viewpoints. Were this to be proven empirically it would mean that the element of critical dialogue is limited and that cyberspace is possibly degenerating into a battlefield of dogmatic interest groups.

However, Stromer-Galley (2003) presented evidence against the homophily perspective arguing that “the Internet does enable public spaces for political conversation [and that] there are people who choose to frequent those spaces with a variety of people and opinions, to engage in those conversations that involve a high level of disagreement”. Still, Stromer-Galley herself acknowledges that more research is needed so as to more confidently reject the homophily thesis. On the other extreme of the spectrum we find flaming and offensive behaviour in virtual fora because of the anonymity and freedom of the medium. That would imply that people are coming across different viewpoints but they react to them in an inflexible way limiting the utility of that virtual space.

Overall, and from a review of recent empirical evidence (see Gerodimos 2004c), two major conditions emerge for the effective function of virtual fora as deliberative spaces with a tangible outcome either in terms of individual and group involvement or in terms of public policy outcome. Both of those conditions constitute key features of contemporary, representative, institutional liberal democracies. The first is the existence of a modus operandi, a set of rules that would be applied onto the space so as to make the rational exchange of views possible. Such a set of rules has been proposed by Clift (1998, 1999, 2004) following the successful application on Minnesota E-Democracy, and could be the result of self-regulation. On the issue of regulation, there seems to be a trade-off between moderation (with the side-effect of agenda setting) so as to ensure effectiveness, and access / inclusiveness.

The second, related, condition is the existence of a locus operandi, i.e. a finite geographical space or community to which the discussion would apply. Dahlberg (2001: 624), who analysed Minnesota E-Democracy, argued that part of its success was due to its focus on “issues located within a geographically bounded political jurisdiction”. According to Downey and Fenton (2003: 189) apart from the fact that people should come across views that they have not chosen in advance (i.e. to avoid homophily), they should also “have a range of common experiences, in order that they may come to an understanding with respect to particular issues”. Any given system needs to be defined by a line of exclusion between ‘us’ and ‘them’. So far that distinction has been based upon geographical factors (i.e. inclusion/exclusion from citizenship is primarily dependent upon physical boundaries). A new line of distinctions may be appearing according to the systemic subject matter (e.g. interest), but that would make inclusion and exclusion extremely controversial.

This dual framework of rules and locality is consistent with evidence emerging from several empirical studies (e.g. Tsagarousianou, Tambini and Bryan 1998) and experiments (e.g. Murray 1998). From this analysis a significant tension arises between the key characteristics of cyberspace (anonymity, lack of boundaries and enforcement of rules) and key constituents of democracy as we know it. For some (e.g. Poster 1995) this is exactly the radical tension needed so as to produce new forms of legitimacy, participation and empowerment. Yet, it should be noted that in practice the lack of rules and the lack of attachment to a particular geographical area can be as much dis-empowering as they can be empowering. For those seeking a more consensual, orderly and practical style of politics that would be applicable “out there” the nature of cyberspace can be very deterring.
Thus, the emergence of counter or alternative public spheres online has provided additional spaces for deliberation and the formation of politically relevant social capital. However, the very same features of cyberspace that have the potential to empower traditionally excluded members of the mass-mediated public sphere, through the formation of alternative identities and the dissemination of marginal voices, can lead to the dis-empowerment of others who are not accustomed with - or keen on - that mode of politics.

Level 3: Online Mobilisation

Although resource mobilisation is an obvious part of this category, it is now widely accepted amongst social movement scholars that other factors such as identity also play a significant role in the mobilisation process and are essential for our understanding of new social movements (NSM). A factor that has been implied so far in this discussion is motivation - a key concept for civic engagement, and also the link between the more reflective aspects of awareness/deliberation and the translation of those into active mobilisation. In order to understand patterns of mobilisation in the 21st century and their impact on the function of social movements we need to consider the interaction of individual psychological factors with contextual, socio-cultural influences. Three interconnected areas are briefly examined below: the role of emotions as drivers of mobilisation; the fusion between citizenship and consumerism; and the fusion between the political and the cultural, expressed through the explicit intersection of popular culture practices and political process.

A common misconception sees emotions in contradistinction to instrumental/utilitarian or cognitive factors. Yet scholars such as Calhoun (2001) argue that emotions are not separate from interests, but actually drive interests; that is to say, mobilisation stimuli from deprivation to (perception of) opportunity to identity constitute attachments to emotions as much as anything else. One might argue that this line of thinking leads to a tautology (in that every human activity can be attributed to emotions), but Polletta and Amenta (2001: 308) propose a way out of that by “[s]pecifying when moral shocks are likely to occur”. What is implied in both contributions is the need to treat emotions not as exclusive properties of the individual, but also as outcomes of interpersonal, collective and organisational actions. For example, Postmes and Burnsting (2002) observe that cognitive factors have a greater influence on mobilisation intentions online rather than offline – individuals are becoming more ‘calculating’ online. In a collective setting that raises the question of whether groups are being more reflective about the reasons and motivations of their own mobilisation and mission (thus leaving space for a more consensual approach) or whether they are focusing more on persuasion tactics and micro-management.

That approach becomes particularly important and topical given the alleged and ongoing cultural shift towards a more individualistic and materialistic culture where consumerism takes the place of citizenship. Scholars such as Scammell (2000: 352) counter that this is not an one-sided move towards consumerism, but something that affects “the day-to-day activity of increasing millions of ordinary folk whose regular conduct of leisure and consumption has an ever-stronger political edge”. This point is further elaborated by Dahlgren (2000: 338) who argues that “if citizenship is a dimension of the self, this does not mean that people necessarily give the word “citizen” a meaning that resonates with them; they may have other vocabularies”. He goes on to argue that researchers should be careful and sensitive to people’s own discourses so as to understand their level of democratic participation.

What is implied here is that academic discourse into consumerism and citizenship may have been trapped in a game of labels, projecting a world of corporate domination and dumbing-down, i.e. essentially reproducing dominant mediated discourses about a commodified culture at a moment when “consumer power” is at an all time high because of increased media attention, regulation and transparency / exposure of scandals. That could mean that core democratic values and civic concerns (that go beyond the individual towards the collective) are merely adapting to the environment and are then reappearing within a discourse of consumerism. That is not necessarily to defend the practice of consumerism.
itself or the move towards a culture and an economy based on corporatism. But it would be useful, when examining motives behind mobilisation, to take an open-minded approach that goes beyond superficial labels and examines the interaction of individual factors and long-term cultural patterns.

It seems that the empowerment of both multi-national corporations (through globalisation) and of a more educated and cautious consumer public facilitates the confrontational character of their interaction through institutional (legal) and non-institutional (non-mainstream) actions. A good example of how consumer empowerment can lead to confrontation with the corporate sector online is music file-sharing and piracy (Denegri-Knott).

A similar point could be made about the fusion between political processes and cultural practices mainly expressed through the increased role of popular culture in activism and populist considerations in politics. Although critical theorists going back to Adorno and Horkheimer have claimed that the cannibalisation of the public sphere by dumbed down ‘culture’ is negatively affecting democracy, Scott and Street argue that the separation between the cultural and the political is an artificial one, since there have always been elements of one in the other. Still, they are critical against the instrumental use of populism and popular culture by political parties and social movements arguing that such engagement "may offer no more than the experience of managed spectatorship" (2000: 235).

Therefore, the common thread running across those contributions is the need to avoid binary oppositions such as emotional/cognitive, emotional/rational, consumerism/citizenship, political/cultural. Instead, we need to examine the key motivations behind individual and group mobilisation; the interaction between individual and collective; the adaptation and re-appearance of citizenship within a changing cultural context, possibly via the creation of a new civic culture online that coexists with increased commercialisation of the online and the offline worlds; and the interpenetration of politics and popular culture, and to what extent political strategists are using culture instrumentally so as to maximise a group’s or an organisation’s appeal to the contemporary public.

In conclusion, whereas in previous decades the main foundations for our understanding of activism were deprivation and identity, a new layer could be developing signifying a new breed of social movements based on power resistance and consumer rights.

**Level 4: Online Conflict**

According to Clausewitz’s famous saying “war is the continuation of politics by other means”. In cyberspace, the continuation of online politics with other means is cyberconflict. This final stage of engagement is qualitatively different from mobilisation in that it marks a shift from persuasive tactics to confrontational ones (see Postmes and Burnsting 2002 for that distinction). Cyberconflict is only now emerging as an area of academic interest; it is quite clearly a practice with bottom-up origins, inherently related to cybeculture, which as was mentioned above is qualitatively different from national or mass-mediated public cultures. Having said that, governments around the world are now also resorting to online offensive action, mostly but not exclusively as a response to attacks. Online conflict comprises of several activities of varying aggressiveness or impact: flaming, hacking, phising, defacements, ‘occupying’ servers and sites, spreading viruses and worms, causing damage on software, denials of service, etc.

Karatzogianni (2004a: 46) distinguishes between two categories of cyberpolitical action: "The first is between two ethnic or religious groups that fight it out in cyberspace, as they do in real life, and the second is between a social movement and its antagonistic institution”. Vegh (2003) distinguishes between different types of online offensive action according to their duration: cyberattack (isolated); cybercampaign (over time); and cyberwar (sustained engagement).
Although online conflict has been associated with anti/alternative/democratic globalisation movements and isolated geeks, it is a tool that is available to everyone and is, in practice, used by governments, extreme leftwing, extreme right-wing groups, post-modern atheists and pre-modern religious fundamentalists. Chroust (2000: 109) argues that “[t]he fundamentalist movements like the neo-Nazis and the Taliban in extremely disparate societies have obviously accepted that the path towards cultural and political hegemony today leads over the information superhighway”.

Therefore, opponents of modernity and postmodernity are fighting Western liberal democracies using their own means and values. This is oddly consistent with another emerging pattern: opponents of consumerism and corporatism are using the tools of modernity and postmodernity (PR, marketing etc) against the corporate world. McCaughey and Ayers (2003: 14) mention the example of a Nike customer who attempted to use a marketing strategy (of customised trainers) to mark the use of sweatshops: “The culture-jamming [Nike] e-mail turned the corporate logic of vita e-mail marketing against itself, a strategy other activists have adopted since. Internet technologies can be used for corporate manipulation, profit, domination, liberation, empowerment, enlightenment and political resistance”.

Although such evidence gives credence to the empowerment-cum-polarisation thesis, from a normative point of view one cannot help but wonder whether in an effort to overcome the lack of transparency, accountability and legitimacy present in established institutions of liberal democracies, such actions are creating a sphere that is critical and potentially inclusive, yet equally unaccountable and arbitrary. Bennett, among many scholars expressing concern about the alleged crisis of legitimacy offline, argues that the “capacity of corporations to escape regulation and win concessions from government has created a political sphere beyond normal legislative, electoral, and regulatory processes” (2003: 148). There is nothing in that quote that cannot be applied to groups using persuasive and confrontational online tools to promote their cause.

**Reflections on Online Civic Engagement**

Although the model discussed above presents the four levels of online engagement in a sequential/linear way for practical reasons, that is not always true in reality. Obviously awareness is the first main expression of engagement, however it was noted that awareness can be a product of elaboration cause by deliberative interaction with others. Furthermore, an individual may ‘jump’ from awareness to conflict, without going through the interim stages of, say, reflective discussion or recruitment to a collective movement. The transition from one stage to another is as interesting as the stages themselves.

Overall, a closer look at the various stages and expressions of online civic engagement confirms the view expressed by several scholars recently (Bimber 2000, Agre 2002), that it is not possible to seek a net effect of the Internet on democracy. That is not to argue that a mere replication or even quantitative amplification of offline engagement practices is taking place. But the expansion of political antagonism in cyberspace creates opportunities and challenges for individuals, groups, institutions and systems. A proliferation of radical participation may be facilitated, but it is not yet clear whether the actual, long-term utility of that development is real and extensive or whether it is creating a virtual sense of power. Even if it is real, very important moral questions arise, such as how equal is the opportunity to access those practices when we are de facto drifting away from institutional democracy based on formal representation.

And obviously this whole discussion is based upon the premise of widespread access into the technologies in the first place. Although access is spreading, there is evidence of major inequalities within and amongst countries and regions, which could limit the use of online tools for civic engagement and it also adds another dimension to the issue of an heterogeneous political landscape. Thus, the main problem facing 21st century liberal
democracies is how to incorporate new forms of reflective and active civic engagement taking place in cyberspace with formal and finite processes of citizenship. The two main obstacles/conditions are the need for a commonly accepted set of rules guiding interpersonal and intergroup communication, and the delineation of finite spaces or communities to which those activities will relate.

In terms of social movement organisation, the shift to a more pluralistic, accelerated environment open to groups of citizens/consumers who are not traditionally associated with activism creates opportunities of greater participation and louder voice, while at the same time posing challenges of management and salience. Still, more empirical research is needed into the uses of online tools and the practices of online civic engagement so as to gain a better understanding on the relationship between the online and offline worlds; how social movements act in both; if and how inequalities of ICT access and expertise affect mobilisation, to mention only a few areas.

The remaining part of this paper draws upon primary and secondary evidence relating to the use of the Internet for civic engagement and group activism before, during, and after the 2nd Gulf War and attempts to offer tentative answers to some of the questions mentioned above.

**Case Study: The 2nd Gulf War and the Post-9/11 Environment**

Although the recent war in Iraq is not a regular case of civic mobilisation, it has been an excellent opportunity to witness the expansion of civic engagement and conflict into cyberspace. The nature of the case is of particular importance: the history and locality of the war, the allegations of links between the former Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda terrorists, and the shift to a more pre-emptive, interventionist foreign policy within an increasingly interdependent and interconnected world are directly linked to the post-9/11 international environment, which is not merely reflected on cyberspace – it is partly shaped by cyberspace.

**Primary Evidence**

The primary data are drawn from a pilot multi-stage research project conducted in Bournemouth, UK, during the first half of 2003 (February and July), i.e. just before and after the 2nd Gulf War. The research design (see Appendices) included:

- an email survey (n=110) of the Bournemouth University community focusing on the use of email as a tool of awareness and mobilisation
- an interview with the Vice-President of Bournemouth University Students Against the War (BUSAW) who was a leading member of the local activist movement in the run-up to the war
- the surveying (n=36) and observation of a critical joint meeting of local groups under the county’s umbrella anti-war movement, ‘Dorset Stop the War Coalition’.

Overall, the research unveiled a picture of mild local mobilisation via the internet during the wider escalation of anti-war activities. That is to say, within a context of unprecedented public dissent and mobilisation, there was a somewhat limited use of online resources in the locality under examination, i.e. Dorset.

The evidence suggests two reasons for this: one medium-specific and one locality-specific. The first cause is lack of access, especially among specific sections of the population such as senior citizens who constituted a key group of the movement. That, subsequently, creates scepticism about the ability of the net to reach the lay citizen, particularly in small or isolated communities in the country, where the development of online culture is minimal (if existent at all). Therefore, the internet is seen as an auxiliary source, as a "reminder" for those that have the means and are part of the sub-culture. The issue proved quite contentious during the civic meeting and one could observe an age divide. Student activists
were particularly keen to use the internet for internal communications, publicity and information regarding the content of the issues. Email was the commonest means through which participants learned about that particular meeting, although more traditional means (such as telephone, posters and word of mouth) were also used extensively.

The other reason for the limited extent of online mobilisation in that instance could have been the civic nature of Dorset, and Bournemouth University in particular. The interviewee gave a quite persuasive justification, i.e. the socio-economic profile of the area along with the vocational character of most university courses. Although a major host of political party conferences, Bournemouth is not considered a prime area of civic engagement. In fact, BUSAW was the only active political society in the University during the academic year 2002/03.

Despite of those two obstacles facing the use of online resources for civic awareness and mobilisation in the area, the university-wide survey indicated a noteworthy flow of anti-war emails, especially anti-war petitions (to be signed and forwarded by the recipient). The majority of anti-war emails were "ignored or erased" by the respondents. However, approximately 1 out of 4 (of those who did receive emails) followed up those messages in one way or another. That makes up for 12% of the overall sample who acted on receiving anti-war messages either by signing/forwarding them or by seeking further information / attending events.

Moving on to associations between variables, there are two 'divides' that are worth mentioning. The first is in relation to Usenet familiarity and is based on gender and capacity. Men / academics are more likely to be familiar with newsgroups than women / admin/support staff. The second divide is based on age and concerns the source and number of anti-war emails received. Younger people are likely to receive more mobilisation emails - and to do so from friends or family; whereas older respondents would receive a slightly smaller number of messages, mainly from colleagues or other acquaintances. Both those findings concur with the 'received wisdom' in the field regarding the gender and age digital divides.

Finally, in an exploration of the deeper factors that make people participate in civic organisations and meetings, the interviewee repeatedly stressed the need for a common forum where issues would be discussed. In fact, she reported that several citizens who disagreed with the essence of BUSAW's positions appreciated the opportunity to debate the content of the issues. If true, this element could be quite encouraging insofar as the quality of our democracy and the expression of civic needs are concerned.

However, that picture is contradicted by my own observation of the civic meeting, which was largely spent discussing organisational/managerial problems (such as event planning) and in which the discussion of the actual issues was minimal if not non-existent. This tension should be explored further because it may prove to be the decisive difference between the ideal/normative function of civic engagement (including via the internet) and the reality on the ground.

Secondary Evidence

The above-mentioned findings are consistent with other recent analyses. A Pew Internet and American Life project report conducted by Rainie, Fox and Fallows (2003: 2) found that 77% of online Americans used the internet in connection with the war in Iraq (that would include all four stages of the typology presented). Furthermore 55% of the online population used email to learn or communicate about the war, while "a small portion of users are using email to mobilize others and gain support for their views about the conflict". Their findings on both the digital divide and the importance of email as a mobilising tool concur with previous reports such as Nie and Erbring (2000).
The perception of new media as an additional tool of an existing toolkit by activists in the run-up to the 2nd Gulf War evident in the primary and secondary data is consistent with Pickerill’s (2000) examination of environmental activists. However, whereas in that instance environmental activists used new ICTs to enhance existing methods of mobilisation without making full use of the new medium, the Iraq case marked the shift to a new level of online activism. Karatzogianni (2004b: 2) argues that in “the months preceding the actual war in Iraq we witnessed a plenitude of phenomena on, off and because of the Internet that in previous international conflicts were only embryonic”. One such example is the proliferation of weblogs and the creation of the ‘citizen-journalist’. Taking into account the caveat of power laws as mentioned above, one could speak of a revolution of ‘voice’ online ranging from the commercial to the alternative to the underground.

Furthermore, before, during and since the war cyberconflict has become part of everyday reality in cyberspace. This is not exclusively due to the Iraq conflict itself; in fact, and following on the argument that cyberspace may partly shape socio-cultural and political developments, one wonders whether Iraq 2003 would have become so central an issue in global politics and the global public sphere if it had not been for the Internet. And, more importantly, whether this sort of attention and reaction will become the norm as waves of opposition break through cyberspace. Interestingly, McClellan wrote in the Guardian a few days before the war started: “The upcoming conflict will be a full-blown information war; it is already a networked conflict... Since September 11, 2001, and the declaration of a war on terror, we’ve been living through a kind of low-level infowar” (2003: 1).

However, to assess the consequences and effects of an online activity, message or source by looking at that element itself would be repeating the mistake made by several critics of the ‘old’ media in that it would ignore the perspective of the audience (or in the case of new media of the user(s)). It is imperative for our understanding of civic engagement and activism that we additionally examine the behaviour of users. For example, it has been noted that the abundance of available information online is leading to what is known as ‘Information Fatigue Syndrome’, which could lead to people’s disengagement from the source and from the issue. This could be particularly true not so much of weblogs (which are a ‘pull’ medium anyway) but of other techniques based on ‘pushing’ information to subscribers (e.g. newsletters, Listservs etc).

Finally, it is important to remember that publicly available tools of mobilisation, recruitment, persuasion and propaganda are not only available to the “good guys”. Kahn and Kellner (2004: 88) argue that “[t]he global internet... is creating the base and the basis for an unparalleled worldwide anti-war/pro-peace and social justice movement during a time of terrorism, war, and intense political struggle”. Be that as it may, the internet also provided a forum for the public transmission (and quasi-eternal availability via sites like www.thememoryhole.org) of Nick Berg’s decapitation video by Al Qaeda in early 2004, something which is difficult to imagine that could have happened via any other forum or means in the history of humanity.

Conclusions

This paper critically assesses recent claims regarding the changing nature of social movements due to the availability of online mobilisation tools and counter-claims about the emerging normalisation of the internet, which will lead to replication of offline patterns of civic engagement. It concludes that there is a continuous re-negotiation of social movement roles and structures in interaction with the medium i.e. cyberspace. The opening up of activism to new population groups provides activists with the opportunity to broaden their impact and meet their strategic targets. On the other hand, given the rhizomatic nature of the Internet, it also poses challenges of management, control and longevity. Rather than being independent from the offline world, social movements still very much need the attention of the mass-mediated public sphere and the foundations of local communities.
Furthermore, the paper introduces a four-level typology with a view to understanding the complex concept of online civic engagement. Using recent evidence in regards to awareness, deliberation, mobilisation and conflict, the paper concludes that the internet is a tool of civic empowerment against the dominant systemic players, while simultaneously creating problems of legitimacy and accountability.

Throughout this paper and from an examination of primary and secondary evidence on the case of the 2nd Gulf War, two themes have been recurring and seem to be of particular importance. The first is the continuous divide between the practice of civic engagement / social activism in real, local communities (or by finite social movements around the world), and the use of online tools by what could be called the cyber-elites, i.e. those with the technological means, expertise, motivation and networks to pursue a goal. While this distinction is not as black-and-white as it sounds, and it does not in any way lessen the potential impact of the cyber-elite’s actions, it raises significant questions of normative order about the inclusion of significant parts of the population, which relates to the long-term legitimacy and ultimate survival of a system or practice.

Although the online and offline worlds are merging, there are limits to what can be achieved in either world in separation. From a democratic theory standpoint, the existence of a set of rules and of a finite locality to which the activities will relate seem to be salient still. From a social movement organisation perspective new media create unique opportunities and challenges that affect the core basis of activism, i.e. cognition, motivation, identity, resources, opportunities.

The second issue is the empowerment and individualisation brought by online tools expressed for example through ‘consumer power’, the re-negotiation of marginal identities and the construction of cyberselves. A side effect of that is the fragmentation and polarisation of the public sphere because of accelerated pluralism and the decline of reflective modes of civic engagement. The levelling of the playing field can liberate long-oppressed voices, but it can also create an alternative public sphere that suffers from a lack of transparency, accountability and regulation that resembles the deficit of the mass-mediated public sphere.

However, these are only indications of opportunities and challenges rather than fixed effects. There is no automatic pilot guiding the evolution of democratic politics. The challenge for decision-makers is to marry the welcome features of the internet, such as freedom of speech, anonymity, empowerment and choice with key democratic features such as fairness, safety, rationality, informed decision-making and the capacity for consensus-building. The challenge for researchers is to go beyond simplistic explanations that overlook the continuous interaction between individuals, groups, movements, means/media, cultures and structures.
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Appendix 1: Survey Questionnaire, Bournemouth University community

method = email survey sent to all staff and research students
n = 110
period = 07-21 February 2003

Section 1:
Capacity: (a) Academic Staff; (b) Admin/Support Staff; (c) Student
Age:
Gender:

Section 2:
In the last four months, (approximately) how many emails do you recall receiving...

Question 1:
...that contained forwarded petitions against a possible war with Iraq (to be signed/forwarded by you)?
  a. 0
  b. 1-4
  c. 5+

1B - If any, did you usually
  a. Ignore/Erase
  b. Forward the email(s) without signing the petition
  c. Sign and forward it.

Question 2:
...that contained details on anti-war speeches, rallies or demonstrations?
  a. 0
  b. 1-4
  c. 5+

2B - If any, did you usually
  a. Ignore/Erase
  b. Forward the information only
  c. Attend the event

Question 3:
...that contained other information regarding the anti-war campaign? (For example information on websites, newsgroups / message boards, anti-war organizations, arguments against the war etc).
  a. 0
  b. 1-4
  c. 5+

3B - If any, did you usually
  a. Ignore/Erase
  b. Act on / Follow / Forward this information (e.g. visit the website)

Section 3

Question 4:
If you have received any of the above types of emails, were these mostly sent by:
  a. Family - Friend/s
  b. Colleague/s
  c. Acquaintances / Others

Question 5:
Finally, are you familiar with internet newsgroups ('usenet')?
  a. No idea
  b. Just the basics
  c. Frequent user

-
Appendix 2: Interview and Observation Details

Interviewee: Vice-President, Bournemouth University Students Against the War
Date: 01 July 2003
Venue: CPCR Media Lab, R305, Royal London House, Bournemouth

Observation: Joint meeting of local civic groups and organisations (such as Bournemouth University Students Against the War) under the umbrella of 'Dorset Stop the War Coalition'.
Date: 26 February 2003
Venue: Lees Lecture Theatre, Bournemouth University
No of participants = 38
Method: Survey (brief questionnaire) of participants (n=36) before the start of the meeting, followed by observation notes during the meeting (duration = 2 hours).

Observation Questionnaire (n=36):

Introduction
Age
Gender
Are you a member of the Bournemouth University community?
   a. Yes - Academic Staff
   b. Yes - Admin/Support Staff
   c. Yes - Student
   d. No

Question 1: Are you a member of a voluntary, civic or non-governmental organisation?
   a. Yes
   b. No

Question 2: How often do you participate in political meetings / gatherings?
   a. Usually
   b. Sometimes
   c. Rarely

Question 3: How did you learn about this meeting?
   a. Poster / Flyer / Notice Board
   b. Email
   c. Website
   d. Usenet / Newsgroups
   e. Telephone
   f. Word of mouth
   g. Other

Question 4: How often do you use the internet?
   a. Every day
   b. A few times per week
   c. A few times per month
   d. Rarely
   e. Never

Question 5: How often do you actively search the internet for information on anti-war activities?
   a. On a daily/weekly basis
   b. A few times per month
   c. Never

Question 6: How often do you receive information via the internet on anti-war activities?
   a. On a daily/weekly basis
   b. A few times per month
   c. Never
Appendix 3: Summary of Results from Email Survey (n=110)

1. Anti-war petitions are the commonest of the three types of emails received by the respondents.

2. Despite the fact that in the three separate categories of emails received (petitions, details on meetings, other information) the ‘zero’ response rate is high (43.6%, 57.3%, 65.5%), 69.1% of all respondents did receive at least one anti-war email. This result is produced by the computing of a new composite variable that aggregates the three categories.

3. The majority of those who received emails ignored/erased them, although there is a consistent minority of c. 12% of the overall sample who did something with those emails (13.6%, 10.9%, 10.9%).

4. The origins of anti-war emails are almost evenly split between family/friends, colleagues and acquaintances/others. The evidence regarding the generation of ‘politically relevant social capital’ is inconclusive.

5. The majority of respondents (53.6%) claim to know “just the basics” about Usenet newsgroups.

6. Gender is a statistically significant factor (p=.016) when it comes to knowledge/use of Usenet: men are more likely to be familiar with newsgroups than women. Gender improves our prediction of Usenet familiarity by 21.2%.

7. Capacity is also a statistically significant factor (p=.004) when it comes to knowledge/use of Usenet: academics are more likely to be familiar with newsgroups than admin/support staff. Capacity improves our prediction of Usenet familiarity by 20.0%.

8. Age has a statistically significant (p=.025) weak negative correlation (r=-.220) with total anti-war emails received. As age increases the number of emails received (from all three categories) reduces slightly.

9. Age (recoded as Ager2) has a statistically significant (p=.049) moderate association (Eta=.449) with the source of emails. Young people are more likely to receive emails from family/friends, whereas older respondents were more likely to receive such emails by colleagues or others.

10. There is a statistically significant (p=.027) weak association between gender and ‘other emails’ received. That is to say, there is a slight difference between the number of such emails that men and women received (V=.256, λ=.096).