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The “Battle of Seattle”: The Internet and the Seattle WTO Protests

By Estelle Nugent. November 24 2004, p 15.

The Internet has inspired belief in a new age of democratic communication flowing from technological advance. Across the globe, democratic forces and insurgent groups have been able to utilise the net’s tremendous advantages in information dissemination and mobilisation as well as bypass the global media system and communicate among themselves. Nowhere was this more evident than at the 1999 World Trade Organisation (WTO) protests in Seattle, where the anti-corporate globalisation activists involved in the protest were able to use the Internet to coordinate actions, build networks, practice media activism, and physically manifest their emerging political ideals.¹ Five years on, it is fair to say that Seattle is remembered primarily as a triumphant moment in modern popular protest. But it also marked an important watershed for Internet-mediated activism.

¹ Juris, “The new digital media and activist networking within anti-corporate globalisation movements”, p 189.

These protests took place in late 1999 when Seattle saw major governments meet at a WTO ministerial meeting to discuss various trading rules. Observers estimated that between 40,000 and 50,000 protesters took to the Seattle streets to oppose WTO power and practices.²

Protest rallies such as this are a form of non-violent action, as are other methods such as strikes, boycotts, marches, fasts, sit-ins and setting up of alternative institutions.³ Communication is essential to successful non-violent action because activists must communicate with each other about their goals and methods. They can also attempt to communicate to their opponents, both directly and through their actions, as well as those not directly involved in the dispute in order to win them over or prevent them joining the other side.⁴ Brian Martin, an Australian expert on communication and non-violent action, has commented that communication technologies that “foster or enable dialogue” are more useful for the purposes of non-violent action than those that “inhibit dialogue”.⁵ This means that if one side in a dispute controls media outlets such as television and radio stations, for example, there is no dialogue. But without dialogue, “the resistance cannot take into account the views of supporters, and cannot foster the capacities of others to use skills and take initiatives” Martin has said.⁶

This occurred to a large degree in the mass media’s reporting of the protests in the country’s main newspapers and on television.⁷ Whilst the majority of protestors were non-violent, a small group started some violence

² Klein (2002, p 267) reported that the protests were convergences of many smaller ones involving those from human rights groups, students, environmental groups, religious leaders, labor rights activists. But all of these groups shared a belief that the disparate problems with which they were wrestling derive from global deregulation, an agenda that is concentrating power and wealth into fewer and fewer hands.

³ Martin, “Communication” in *Technology for Nonviolent Struggle*, 2001 (accessed online).

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ FAIR, “Initial Reports from Seattle Gloss Over WTO Issues” (online), available: <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1820>

and looting that led to the issuing of curfews, arresting, tear-gassing, pepper spraying and even shooting rubber bullets at innocent, non-violent protestors. This became the mainstream media's major coverage focus; often portraying *all* the protestors as loony leftists or violent groups with no clue as to what they are talking about.⁸ This is because the media mentality is based not on democratic ideals, but on profit. The corporate media are in the business of selling their audience to advertisers, and ensuring them that nothing aired on TV or printed in the press would hurt their public relations campaigns.⁹ So the mainstream media essentially omitted the perspective of the protestors', who were forced to use other media to share experiences. But if the only means of communication in a society were interactive, network systems then an aggressor or oppressor would have the great difficulty in controlling the population. Examples of this type of communication include face-to-face discussion, telephone, radio, and computer networks.¹⁰

According to Martin, interactive network media are most effective for non-violent action when they are generally accessible, easy to use, difficult for dominators to control, and when they encourage widespread development of appropriate skills.¹¹ On the whole the Internet fits most of these criteria: it is an effective means of communication for non-violent action because it cannot be dominated by a small number of users, and is an interactive and highly participatory medium that has a global reach and low costs.

It is difficult for dominators such as media proprietors to control the Internet. In fact, no one owns the Internet. The peer-to-peer and network-to-network infrastructure of the Internet has created a method for interacting

⁸ Klein, "The vision thing: were the DC and Seattle protests unfocused, or are the critics missing the point?", p 265.

⁹ Today, most of the media is owned by a core of five gigantic, multinational corporations, which exercise tight control of everything we see and hear. Some of these corporations that directly benefit from the free trade practices that the Seattle protestors' were targeting.

¹⁰ Martin, *op cit.*

¹¹ *ibid*

within a mediated world and publicly debating the important issues of our times.¹² In other words, the net has radically empowered citizens to reclaim and redefine the public sphere¹³, simultaneously providing access to uncensored and unfiltered information all over again. And this time the information is available on a global scale.¹⁴

One of the strongest attributes of the net during the Seattle protests was its speed in disseminating information to a large number of activists. Considerable mobilisation was conducted through the Internet months prior to the meeting. Seattle police admit being unprepared for the Internet-enhanced coordination of the protestors, who delayed events by preventing delegates from entering meeting places.¹⁵ The use of e-mail distribution lists meant that in the time it takes to click on a "send" icon, the entire membership of an activist group could be sent a request for mobilisation.¹⁶

Two long-established NGOs in particular, London-based Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) and Washington DC-based Public Citizen, were important in the Seattle movement. The actions of these two groups can be used to illustrate some of the most important aspects of the Seattle Internet-mediated activism. The use of both the Web and a discussion list, or listserv, were two key tools used by these NGOs to educate and organise action.¹⁷ The FoEI was important in establishing a Web-based Stop the Millennium Round Statement, signed by 1,500 activist groups world-wide. At the same time, Public Citizen constructed two designated mobilisation websites:

¹² Nogueira, "The birth and promise of the Indymedia revolution", p 290.

¹³ Habermas (1992) spoke of the notion of the "public sphere" as the short-lived creation of a genuinely open public space in the 18th century where people could gather to discuss the current politics and ideas of the day.

¹⁴ The Internet is the fastest-growing communication tool ever developed. According to <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats> there are currently 957, 753, 672 Internet users worldwide.

¹⁵ Klotz, *The Politics of Internet Communication*, p 87.

¹⁶ Klein, *op cit*, p 267.

¹⁷ The FoEI website in particular outlined objectives, activities, a short- and long-term campaign scope and links to contacts and other resources. The WTO's position as global trade arbitrator, including its history and contemporary influence, was featured in a selection of fact sheets and essays.

SeattleWTO.org and Seattle99.org. As well as educating, these websites linked activists with hosts in Seattle offering accommodation; guaranteeing affordable housing for hundreds of protesters.¹⁸

Grassroots media activists also established the Independent Media Centre (IMC) to cover events from the barricades, streaming video, images, radio and text direct to the Internet.¹⁹ Its role was to use the Internet to present both different viewpoints to the dominant ones about the nature of the anti-WTO protests taking place in the city, but also to enable critics of the WTO to publish alternative analyses online through a common portal. The Seattle IMC drew not only upon the energies of the activist community but also upon the considerable technical expertise that resided in the city, where a large number of computer programmers existed to provide support for the development of open publishing alternatives to proprietary, corporate controlled software development.²⁰

Indymedia describes itself as “a collective of independent media organisations and hundreds of journalists offering grassroots, non-corporate coverage” and a “democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate and passionate tellings of the truth”.²¹ Participation is at the heart of *Indymedia*: its backbone is the open-source software that allows people to instantly upload stories and clips onto the site. This system allows for a decentralised network of contributors to voice diverse perspectives and information. A degree of editorial control over the wire and the general content of the Web site does exist, however, to ensure that editorial content is newsworthy, credible and consistent with the mission of the IMC.²²

¹⁸ Eagleton-Pierce, “The Internet and the Seattle WTO protests”, p 332.

¹⁹ *ibid.* <http://www.indymedia.org> is the common web address of the growing number of Independent Media Centres.

²⁰ Flew, *New Media: An Introduction*, p 92. See also Ballve (2004) and Tarleton (2000).

²¹ <http://www.indymedia.org/en/static/about.shtml>

²² Nogueira, *op cit*, p 295.

And the news that was uploaded was evidently what a lot of people wanted to read. It is estimated that, at the height of the 1999 protests, the IMC site in Seattle was averaging 2.5 million viewers every two hours.²³ Over the five days of protest the *Indymedia* site also received more hits than CNN's web site whilst its audio and video clips were rebroadcast on community radio stations and cable public access channels.²⁴ By and large, the IMC established in Seattle has changed the relations between producers and consumers of the media, enabling more localised, "on the spot" narratives to reach a wider audience than earlier forms of media have been able to do.²⁵

Seattle proved that the Internet is a tremendous tool for educating and organising. It provides permanent and updated information points, facilitates instantaneous communication in restricted and open forms, is global in scope, and is relatively inexpensive. There is no question that access to this information is a precondition for many activist struggles and that the Internet provides a great advantage. Above all, the Internet's anarchy and decentralised architecture suits the relationships activists wish to foster: thanks to the Net, mobilisations are able to unfold with sparse bureaucracy and minimal hierarchy.

The example of *Indymedia* also showed how the Internet can provide new possibilities for competitive communication, thereby removing the monopoly power threat from the continuing expansion of the media giants. There is little doubt that the Internet is providing a superior mechanism for individuals and groups marginalised by the commercial media system to communicate and share information quickly, in large quantity, and on a global basis. For these reasons, the Internet was an effective form of communication

²³ Platon and Deuze, "Indymedia Journalism: a radical way of making, selecting and sharing news?", p 339.

²⁴ Flew, *op cit.*

²⁵ Flew, *op cit.*

for the non-violent action that occurred in Seattle in 1999 and also a noteworthy historical development for democratic communication.

Wired: Letters to the Editor

November 25 2004, p 20

WORLDWIDE Web?

I love your newspaper and I buy it everyday but I am a bit concerned by Estelle Nugent's ("The 'Battle of Seattle': The Internet and the Seattle WTO Protests", November 24) claim that the Internet was an effective form of communication in the Seattle protests because it is a truly "global" medium. She seems to have forgotten that the majority of the world's citizens still do not have access to this technology and that using the Internet requires skills not held by everyone.²⁶ Nugent seems to have become confused between distribution and access. There is no doubting the Internet's distribution possibilities but people's ability to *access* that information remains a sizeable obstacle. People must have access to the Internet to take advantage of its global potential. The fact is that more than half of those with Internet access live in either the United States or the Europe,²⁷ so most of the world's citizens are not able to access the net. Even for those with connections, sites like *Indymedia* may not be immediately accessible in the sense that people have to know about the site in order to go there. So because the Internet is not widely accessible or easy to use, I therefore must disagree with Nugent's claim that it was more effective than any other communication technology during the 99' Seattle protests.

Marni Mishki, Moffatville CA.

Net Not Democratic Yet

It seems to me that Estelle Nugent is suggesting that the Seattle protests could not have happened without the use of the web ("The 'Battle of Seattle': The Internet and the Seattle WTO Protests", November 24). Well she obviously was not in attendance at these protests. If she were there she would have seen that the full range of other, conventional means of organising protests were used: posters, leaflets, telephone, word of mouth and even graffiti which appeared in the city prior to the event. No doubt a number of protestors did turn up through having seen notices on a website, but I believe most would have visited the sites

²⁶ Marni Mishki argues that the Internet is flawed as a communication technology to be utilised in non-violent action because it is not "easily accessible" or "easy to use" (Martin, 2001).

²⁷ Cyberatlas 2004, *The World's Online Populations*, available: http://www.clickz.com/stats/big_picture/geographics/article.php/151151.

after being alerted through one of these other mechanisms. The Internet may work alongside other technologies as a useful means of organising campaigns through e-mail for contact and web pages for publicity and advertisement but there is little evidence to suggest that the net offers unique advantages for campaigning purposes over these other methods and technologies.²⁸ Traditional campaigning techniques such as political lobbying continue, and “old” technologies such as telephones and fax machines are, equally, if not more important than ever to the running of an effective campaign. Nugent, by her constant praise of the Internet, seems to be suggesting that words and ideas alone are enough to bring about fundamental change. If that were the case then certainly the Internet would be all that was needed. But intellectual activity alone does not restore democratic imbalances. Seattle showed that when real people take to the streets the real sources of oppression are challenged. The Internet may be effective as an alternate information channel but it is not effective for democracy.

Lenny Haffenden, Brooklyn NY.

WTO advocates use the Net too

In her article Estelle Nugent speaks of the open publishing technology used by *Indymedia* that allows for anyone to post just about anything on the site. Surely this openness diminishes the quality and accuracy of the reporting? Surely then Indymedia is just a bulletin board for the far left? While the Seattle protestors’ no doubt enjoyed the benefits of the Internet, advocates like Nugent should not forget that it does indeed provide opportunities to everybody – and that includes opponents.²⁹

Randy Baker, Twitchford Falls OK.

²⁸ This letter typifies the perspectives of those like Lax (“The Internet and Democracy”, p 167) who believe advocates of the Internet as a democratic mass medium perspective are technology deterministic.

²⁹ Randy Baker’s letter outlines an additional two criticisms of the Internet as an effective medium for democratic communication and non-violent action. He adopts the Conservative perspective, which often attacks *Indymedia* primarily for its perceived biases towards radical leftist ideologies. The other criticism is that the net provides just as much advantage to advocates of the WTO as it did to activists.

Dialogue:

The dialogue takes place between Estelle, the writer of above article and Jeff, a student of media and communications currently doing an internship at the *Wired* paper. Jeff has a few different views about the Internet and its potential as an effective medium for non-violent struggle and democracy so it should make for interesting conversation!³⁰

Jeff: Why did you decide to write about Seattle and the Internet?

Estelle: I am very interested in the Internet's potential as a democratic information source. Privately owned media corporations threaten democracy because media proprietors are able to use their media outlets to promote their commercial and political interests. Their media offerings are also often shaped by advertiser interests and which means that there is minimal public participation, which is the antithesis of democracy. So if media institutions are in the hands of a few it is hard for individuals and groups with different ideas to get their ideas circulated because they will rarely make it to the front page of a newspaper or the television screen. The Internet, though, breaks down these barriers because no-one owns it. I wanted to show that websites such as *Indymedia* have the potential for presenting alternate information to a global audience without having to go through the corporate filter.

Jeff: Were you worried about criticising the media when you are a member of the media yourself?

³⁰ The overall aim of this dialogue is to present the different viewpoints in existence about the potential of the Internet for use during non-violent action and for democracy.

Estelle: No because the goal of our paper is to provide insight into how the net is affecting society and culture. My article contributes to our goal and to do this I had to expose the profit-driven mentality of much of the media.

Jeff: You are obviously also interested in the Internet as a useful communication technology for non-violent action?

Estelle: Yes I am. I thought Brian Martin's theory of communication technology for non-violent struggle really applied to the utilisation of the Internet during the Seattle protests. So I genuinely wanted to understand the how the Internet was used as a campaign tool by activists, how the Internet affected relations between activists and what alternative protest strategies the Internet offered during the Seattle protests.

Jeff: Oh yes I am familiar with this theory. Martin claims that interactive network media such as the telephone and radio are most effective for non-violent action doesn't he?

Estelle: That's right. And the main thrust of his theory is that interactive network media are most useful for non-violent action when they are generally accessible, easy to use, difficult for dominators to control, and when they encourage widespread development of appropriate skills.³¹ I wanted to show that the Internet fulfils most of these requirements.

Jeff: How did you get all the information for your article?

³¹ Martin, *op cit.*

Estelle: My main source of information was articles from different journals. I also went to the *Indymedia* site to check out its layout and their main objectives. The FAIR website was also very helpful because it contained a whole database of articles that showed how biased the mainstream media coverage was towards the violent aspects of the protests.

Jeff: So your main sources were journal articles and websites?

Estelle: Yeah that's right. But I also sent a group email around to some of my friends asking them three questions: "What do you know about the 1999 Seattle WTO protests"; "What role do you think the Internet can play in social activism" and "Do you think the Internet is a democratic mass medium?". Only a few people replied and those that did didn't really know much about the protests. The main responses I got to the first question were that they were very violent, which just shows how much the mainstream media's coverage influenced people. I probably could have got better responses if I had more questions and gave a bit of background to the events. Do you suggest any other research techniques I could have used?

Jeff: Well what about getting in contact with some of the actual protestors' who used the net for activism. Surely that's possible by finding an appropriate forum group or something?

Estelle: Yes I thought about that. I "lurked"³² on a few discussion boards that gave me a few ideas but I didn't post anything because to do that you have to become a member of the boards and I didn't want to do that.

Jeff: Fair enough. Let's move on to the first point of the theory then. I agree that the Internet is providing a superior mechanism for those marginalised by the commercial media system to communicate and share information quickly but I don't think it can be used for this on a global basis because many of the world's citizens still do not have access to the net.

Estelle: While there is definitely a digital divide in existence, I believe the Internet is able to reach more people worldwide than any other form of interactive network media. It definitely offers possibilities for creating virtual communities beyond the national level via chat rooms and discussion forums. And it is also much easier, for instance, to save, copy and distribute text via computer networks than via phone.³³ The Internet has no rivals for disseminating information inexpensively, where the Seattle activists were able to use e-mail lists, Web pages, and open editing software to organise and coordinate actions, share information, and produce documents.

Jeff: But aren't the skills and investment required to become a skilled user of the net much greater than to become a proficient user of the telephone?

³² In Internet culture, a lurker is a person who reads discussions on a message board, newsgroup, chatroom or other interactive system, but does not participate.

³³ *ibid*

Estelle: Well many Independent Media Centres are conscious of this so they work hard to create physical resource centres that welcome people into the media-making world by offering workshops in everything from how to get an email account, to newspaper layout, editing videos, or even performing system administration.³⁴ These may be skills not held by everyone but there is definitely encouragement for the widespread development of skills needed to use *Indymedia* and the Internet in general, which Martin's theory states is another desirable element for communication technologies being successful for non-violent action.

Jeff: That sounds promising, but I think that all this talk of the radical decentralisation the net provides is really concealing a very real hierarchy based on who owns, understands and controls the computer networks linking the activists to one another. Doesn't this mean that the net fails in terms of being a medium that is difficult for dominator's to control?

Estelle: But *Indymedia* uses open publishing, which means that anyone is free to post articles, photos and just about any other media on the site.

Jeff: Surely that just opens them up to be criticised as just another alternative lefty publication?

Estelle: Well according to Ana Nogueira, whose source I consulted for my article, readers accustomed to this model actually understand the disadvantages of open publishing; they realise that any media – open or not

³⁴ Nogueira, *op cit*, p 295.

- should be read with a critical eye. Their goal, rather, is to lay the infrastructure for a multimedia peoples' newsroom that enables activists to come together and disseminate their own stories to a global audience without having to go through the corporate filter.³⁵ So, unlike the mainstream media, it is hard for the Internet to be controlled by proprietors, again adding to its worth as an effective medium for non-violent struggle.

Jeff: So your overall perspective is that the Internet, and in particular the *Indymedia* web site, was an effective technology for the Seattle protests because it is interactive, participatory, global in nature and cannot be controlled by the current crop of media proprietors?

Estelle: That's right. I think you've summed it up pretty well. You seem to be a bit of a critic of the net's potential for social activism. What's your overall perspective?

Jeff: My view is that despite its high viewership during mass demonstrations in Seattle, it is unclear how successful the Internet, and *Indymedia* site for that matter, has become as a source of information people regularly use and rely on. Given that access to the Internet is a prerequisite for tapping into the global *Indymedia* network, the low levels of computer availability in many impoverished parts of the world begs the question of how global this phenomenon truly is or can be. Still, I believe that globalisation is a choice, not an inevitability, and I think *Indymedia* testifies to the

³⁵ *ibid*

notion that the choice is not whether globalisation is good or bad, but rather what kind of globalisation people will choose to live with.

Estelle: I agree with you. We definitely have a choice in regards to globalisation. We can say well, "that's the way it is" and do nothing. Or we can construct a different way, show the world what is really happening, have a critical worldview and to become interested in the truth of what happens to people from all over the world. *Indymedia* provides an effective means of doing this.

Jeff: Have my points of view changed your thinking at all about the potential of the net for non-violent action or democracy in general?

Estelle: Well I still think that the net is a vital part of the advocacy of activist groups. But from taking all the perspectives into account, I realise that communication technologies like the net do not eliminate hierarchy and exploitation. But they definitely do aid resistance.³⁶ In terms of democracy, I think that a big part of democracy is seeking out the stories of all those who live on the margins and lack power within the system. The *Indymedia* site may still a long way from fulfilling this ideal because not everyone has access to the net, but at least the will to do so is there.

³⁶ Martin, *op cit.*

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