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Information Technology and Peace Activism. Since the late 1980s, the Internet has played an ever-increasing role in political activity. Protesters use the Internet in two main ways: as a tool for information and communication and as a medium of struggle.

The most obvious role for the Internet is as a tool for promoting ideas and organizing activities. A Web site is an addition to previous ways of presenting information such as articles, leaflets, and posters; e-mail is an addition to previous methods of activist communication such as meetings, the mail (commonly called "snail mail"), and telephone or fax. In organizing a rally, for example, pre-Internet generations would distribute flyers, put up posters, and telephone or post notices to likely participants, each of these operating as a seeding process for subsequent dissemination, especially by word of mouth. For getting out news of an event, e-mail is cheaper, easier, and can be used to reach a more diverse audience.

In 1997, the activist group Global Tradewatch received leaked information about plans by governments for a Multilateral Agreement on Investment (**MAI**). The mass media were not interested in this issue; the activists, using the Web and e-mail, publicized the plans for and implications of the MAI. Other concerned groups added information relevant to local conditions plus their own critiques of the MAI, helping trigger protests in many countries that eventually led to the scrapping of the agreement.

Mobile phones (cell phones)—with capacity for voice and text messages—are another new protest-organizing tool. Many mobile phones now have Internet access, and their text messaging facility mimics e-mail. Widespread use of mobile phones enables a greater capacity for communication between participants within an action or between participants and observers. They allow actions to be improvised at short notice, with changes of venue or focus. Video and audio recording equipment, sometimes as part of mobile phones, can be used to record actions as they occur and to post clips on the Web. Indymedia, an interactive Internet communications forum set up by computer-savvy activists to build in participatory features, has become a popular outlet for reports on and images of protest, including much material neglected or avoided by the mass media.

The Internet allows petitions to be circulated far more

efficiently than using pen and paper. Some petitions are e-mailed to potential recipients; others allow supporters to add their names to an interactive Web site.

Internet-based political organizing can be a supplement to conventional organizing or a virtual replacement. For example, MoveOn.org, a U.S. political advocacy group, has relied very heavily on online methods.

The Internet as a Protest Tool

Activists from earlier generations also dealt with information and communication technologies (**ICTs**), including newspapers, telephone, radio, television, and fax, each one novel in its time. Each ICT has characteristic features that enable or inhibit use by activists or their opponents. Mainstream newspapers, radio, and television are largely one-directional: a small number of people control the content, which is disseminated to large numbers of consumers. As a result, these ICTs are more suited for centralized control and are often the first targets in a coup d'état. Network communication methods, including face-to-face conversations, telephone, citizens band radio, and fax, allow for more interaction and are more suited to participatory politics. The Internet, as its name implies, is a network communications medium, which is a key reason that it has been so widely adopted by activists. The Web has a one-to-many format, but because it is cheap and easy to set up Web sites, the Web is far more participatory than mass media. New tools on the Web, such as blogs and wikis, are making it ever more interactive.

Other advantages of the Internet for activists in developed countries are low cost, global reach, and widespread use. If the Internet were for activists only, it would undoubtedly come under fierce attack. But because it is so widely used by businesses, governments, and citizens, it is very unlikely that any government would attempt to shut it down.

Some governments try to constrain protesters' use of the Internet. Quite a number of governments block access to antigovernment Web sites and put pressure on Internet service providers over Web site content. Internet censorship can be challenged by setting up mirror sites in foreign countries to get around national censorship and by developing software to circumvent Web site filters.

Governments commonly monitor electronic communication, including e-mail. There are various ways to evade surveillance, including using encryption, anonymous remailers, and one-use-only e-mail addresses established at Internet cafés. However, only some activists take special measures to disguise or hide

their communication. Governments also use ICTs for their own purposes, including having police photograph protesters and compile databases on protester activity.

Another important factor is the sheer size of the Internet and the huge volume of traffic, which hinders electronic monitoring of dissidents. By contrast, when protesters attempt to get their message out, it may be lost in the vast sea of information, unseen or ignored by potential supporters. Information overload may be a bigger problem than being censored or monitored by governments.

The Internet as a Medium of Struggle

As well as being a tool for protesters, the Internet is also the scene of struggle itself. In a denial-of-service attack, activists encourage supporters to repeatedly access a target Web site so that it is overloaded and cannot be accessed by ordinary users. Such attacks can be automated, too, using special software. Another way to attack a Web site is by hacking into its code and replacing some of its images or displaying a protest message, the Internet equivalent of defacing a billboard.

Malicious Internet techniques include writing and distributing computer viruses, cracking (remotely breaking into a computer and destroying, altering, or stealing information, such as credit card numbers), and spoofing (setting up a fake Web site to entrap users). Few protesters see these as appropriate tactics.

For most activists, the Internet is a powerful and effective tool, but still just a tool along with other information and communication technologies. Mounting direct attacks over the Internet requires special skills and seldom seems to lead to significant benefits for activists. Indeed, malicious methods can readily be used against activists. Rather than developing the capacity to mount attacks, activist priorities, in terms of methods in cyberspace, have mainly been enabling the free expression of ideas and protecting against attacks.

There are many individuals and groups deeply committed to an Internet free of censorship, surveillance, and centralized control. Their efforts—for example, concerning encryption, protocols, and regulations—are crucial in maintaining the Internet as a useful tool. Activist use of the Internet thus is underpinned by campaigns and initiatives to make the Internet a free, egalitarian medium.

[*See also* **Information, Communications Technologies, and Peace**]

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Brian Martin

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