

### On the functions and consequences of the Internet for social movements and voluntary associations

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# SOCIOLOGY IN SWITZERLAND

Social Movements, Pressure Groups and Political Parties

## On the Functions and Consequences of the Internet for Social Movements and Voluntary Associations

Hans Geser  
March 2001 (Release 2.0)

“To the '60s radical, ‘Turn on, tune in, drop out’  
was a mantra. In these Web-happy days it could  
be, “Boot up, log on, download.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Harris in The Wall Street Journal, August 5, 1999

## **1. Introduction**

For securing their internal cohesion as well as their capacities for collective action, all voluntary associations need to maintain highly sophisticated and regularized processes of vertical and horizontal communication. Thus, leaders and officials of the central bureaucracy rely on top-down communication for informing, mobilizing and indoctrinating active members, passive sympathizers and the general public population; members have to rely on bottom-up channels to articulate their demands and expectations or propose candidates as well as for expressing criticism and support; and on all levels, horizontal multilateral interactions are needed for the exchange of information and opinions, for discussions and deliberation. Typically, all of these three basic modes are multi-layered in the sense that there is (1) a most inclusive sphere of public communication, (2) a more restricted communicative realm reserved to members or participants of special subgroups, and (3) a highly exclusive sphere only accessible to core participants (e. g. full-time functionaries or members of ruling boards).

Reviewing the long-term history of communication media, it becomes evident that the technologies available for top-down, bottom-up and horizontal communication have evolved in highly divergent ways.

Since the inception of the printing press in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, only the “one-to-many” media have made significant technological progress: culminating in the highly centralized modern mass media systems (press, radio, TV and cinema) which are largely dominating the public sphere (Habermas 1962).

In the realm of decentralized horizontal communication, only the telephone has brought major innovative potentials. But as it can be used (almost) only for bilateral talks, it has contributed little to any processes of social collectivization. On the contrary, the telephone may have contributed to a growing “depolitization” of society by isolating dyadic microsocial communications from wider social settings.

On the other hand, almost no technological innovations have been made to facilitate “many-to-one” communications needed for bottom-up processes of collective articulation, or to promote “many-to-many” exchanges apt to increase the cohesion of multilateral networks and groups.

As in the distant past, 10 000 letters have still to be produced and distributed when each participant of a 100-member group intends to send a message to each other member; when the lecturer has finished, “applause” is still the dominant audience reaction despite the fact that as a mere variety of noise, it cannot be specified to carry more sophisticated information; and whenever Yes-No - plebiscites are enacted, the bottom-up information delivered by each voter is on the lowest possible level: exactly one bit.

In addition, the integration of the different communication modes is severely hampered by the fact that they are based on completely different technological devices so that constant human efforts (taking minutes, making transcriptions, tape-recording, photocopying, scanning, vote counting etc.) are needed to transpose given information from one medium to another.

Evidently, these asynchronies in the evolution of communication technologies have had major impacts on the evolution of modern society in all institutional spheres. While they have certainly favored the emergence and perpetuation of highly centralized collectivities (like bureaucratic organizations and authoritarian political regimes), they have equally hampered the establishment and functioning of collectivities based on more decentralized social structures and processes: e. g. grassroots movements and all kinds of (formally democratic) voluntary associations.

In other words: the deficient technological support for bottom-up and multilateral communication may explain why all major societal developments of the last five centuries have predominantly been shaped by rather authoritarian types of organizations (bureaucracies, business corporations etc.), while associational organizations (co-operatives, parties, unions etc.) have played a more modest role.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, almost all influential conventional media are either dominated by political power centers or by economic corporations, while the “Civil society” (as it was invoked by John Locke) has not gained a strong independent voice (Frederick 1992).<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the predominance of unilateral top down media has been a factor in making social movements and associations more elitist and centralized: thus giving rise to the famous “iron law of oligarchy” expounded by Robert Michels (1911) and Max Weber; and of justifying “resource mobilization” theories which assert that social movements are typically emerging as products of centralized “social entrepreneurship”, not as the result of decentralized “collective behavior” (McCarthy/Zald 1994).

In a more general way, indirect forms of representative democracies have been established almost everywhere because of the high costs and technological difficulties connected with all forms of grassroots participation and plebiscitarian procedures.

Seen in this wider perspective, the Internet is a tool particularly useful for associations because it fully supports unilateral and bi-directional information flows and bilateral as well as multilateral communications. Thus, it offers a highly generalized technological environment in which all possible communications can be processed and linked to each other almost without costs, spatial limits and temporal delays.

Paradoxically then, the most revolutionary impact of the new computer media on voluntary associations may result from their ability to bring factual communication flows (or even influence patterns) more in line with those idealistic conceptions they always have propagated in their formal charters: with their standards of internal democracy as well as their goals related to inter-associational solidarity and concerted external action:

*"Ironically, this technology was almost designed for the labour movement. It fits us perfectly. That is not what its inventors and developers had in mind, of course. But the fact is that computer communications technology is very cheap, easy to learn and use. And promotes decentralization."* (Lee 1993)<sup>4</sup>

For example, the Internet is finally fulfilling the utopian ideas of Charles Levinson (president of the ICF) who suggested already in 1972 that the International Labour Union Movement should make extensive use of new “telematic technologies” in order to strengthen its global reach:

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<sup>2</sup> For example, it is highly evident that by controlling the mass media, governments and business elite have contributed much to the weakening of labor movements (and their respective organizations) (Lee 1994; 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Among the “third sectors” equidistant to economic and political influences, religious organizations have been most successful in establishing their own media. But during the last decades, their audience and impact have significantly declined.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Lee (1993): Computer Communications and the Labour Movement. In: Bulletin of the International Federation of Worker's Education Associations, 3, December 1993, <http://www.poptel.org.uk/ifwea/ifwwe03.html>

*"Data banks could be linked by telex to ICF headquarters and information rapidly transmitted to affiliates upon request."*<sup>5</sup>

Given these prevoiant plans and proposals, it is not astonishing that labor unions began to implement extensive computer-net projects in the beginning 80ies already (when stand-alone computers were still dominating in most businesses); and that since 1990 they organized several significant congresses where the use and impact of these new media were discussed.<sup>6</sup>

After a bold first experiment in British Columbia in 1981, the new technologies were for the first time systematically implemented by the British "Popular Telematics Project" (poptel) in 1985 as well as by the International Labour Union secretariats which introduced e-mail applications shortly after that date.<sup>7</sup>

## **2. The Internet as a Facilitative Tool for Founding, Integrating and Managing Voluntary Associations**

Within all modern democratic societies, there are formalized devices apt to facilitate the generation and survival of voluntary associations. For instance, the civil law offers highly routinized procedures for founding such groups and formats for shaping their internal organization.

Thus, there is a positive interplay between centralized-formalized bureaucratic structures of society and its flora of voluntary associations (of which Germany provides a good example).

Such devices are useful because founding members and administrators stem from very widespread (also rather uneducated) segments of population, and because the opportunities for horizontal interaction are usually so limited that there is no great potential for complex deliberations and decisions.

In this perspective, the World Wide Web can be seen as an additional potent source for such routinized devices and procedures: by offering software for processing communications, formats for presenting, storing, and transmitting information, programs to facilitate discussions and the exercise of leadership functions, forms for subscribing to membership and paying contributions, etc etc.

*"Yahoo! UK & Ireland today launched Yahoo! Clubs (<http://uk.clubs.yahoo.com>), a new community building service that enables people to create their own personal Web communities and interact on a regular basis with friends, relatives, colleagues and anyone who shares a similar interest. Yahoo! Clubs gives users a unique communications centre on the Web, combining some of Yahoo's most popular community tools - message boards, chat, profiles and personalization services. Yahoo! Clubs is an ideal community platform for groups of all types, including workgroups, families, investment clubs, associations, fan clubs and school and student organizations."*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in: Eric Lee (1995): Labour and the Internet. In: Internet Business Journal, <http://www.solinet.org/LEE/ibj.html>

<sup>6</sup> The conference held in Manchester on April 1992 was of particular importance.

<sup>7</sup> Following these pioneering innovations, various "labor nets" have been established in a variety of countries (USA, Denmark, New Zealand, Australia, Russia, South Korea etc.).

<sup>8</sup> M2 Communications, March 10, 2000.

Most features relevant to virtual community building are provided on this Yahoo site: photo albums, member profiles, club calendar, chatrooms, club statistics, and Web links. Web links are particularly salient for inserting any newly founded group from the beginning into a rich network of existing groups – thus making it more extraverted and cooperative than conventional voluntary associations. Of course, these routinized tools may be particularly important for connecting geographically widely dispersed participants (or local chapters), because they facilitate the formation of groupings with very low or zero F2F interaction.

Compared to most conventional supports for association building (like legal statutes or founding activities of mother organizations), such WWW provisions are outstanding by the fact that they support processes of collectivization without enforcing at the same time any kind of restrictions, prohibitions or measures of social control.

For appreciating these purely facilitative functions, it is helpful to consider that voluntary associations diverge dramatically in the way the relationship between the membership base and the central organization is regulated.

Taking the power relationship between the two system components as the defining characteristic, three basic models can be identified:

<b>Centralized</b>	<b>Equilibrated</b>	<b>Decentralized</b>
<b>master-slave model</b>	<b>citizen-government model</b>	<b>client – server model</b>
The organization (and its leadership) exercises authoritarian control. The members have no say when binding collective decisions are made; and their strict conformity to centralized orders and rule is enforced.	Organization and membership are equal partners. Collective decisions are deliberated and decided democratically: in bodies where both are represented. Leadership is responsive to the members, and all members can claim precisely defined rights vis-à-vis the organization.	The central organization is fully subordinated to the needs of the members. It is reduced to a pure “subsidiary” status by providing services which can be used by the members whenever they choose, and by catalyzing communication and group processes among the members.

In historical evolution of computer networks, the *master-slave model* has dominated in the era of large expensive mainframe computers which were embedded in highly centralized structures of formal control. Whoever controlled the big machine was able to set the terms for the peripheral users which had to adapt to the restrictions set by the hardware, the software as well as by the specific operating rules.

With the rise of personal computers, this authoritarian regime has given way to the *client-server* model where the central computer is reduced to a generalized service station which empowers the individual users instead of dominating them: e. g. by offering them storage space and downloadable software, by mediating their access to more encompassing computer networks (e. g. the Internet) or by making available large quantities of pooled information.

Such decentralized technological structures can provide the basis for an isomorphic kind of social organization where the center is reduced to a subordinated instrumental role. For example, they can give rise to voluntary associations where the center is functioning as a “*clearing house*”: helping members to reach their specific goals: by facilitating the

flow of information and communication, by mediating interaction partners and by catalyzing the emergence of online communities and other social groups.

The major function of clearing houses is to provide software tools of collaboration and to generate contacts among individuals and groups with similar values and goals, but unacquainted with each other and/or unable to coordinate their activities by direct horizontal interaction.

Activists send information relevant to their movement to the clearinghouse address. Interested users "subscribe" to the clearinghouse service, which upon receipt of a contribution automatically sends an electronic mail message to all its subscribers containing the contents of the contribution.

*"This method is an extremely efficient means for activists to send information to hundreds or even thousands of activists whom they have never met. After the message is sent through the clearinghouse service, the personal message forwarding process takes over as activists forward to their acquaintances all or part of the information they have received. The clearinghouse method requires considerably more organization and sustained commitment because activists must take responsibility for starting the clearinghouse, maintaining subscription lists, monitoring the content of contributions, and ensuring the proper functioning of the service."* (Myers 1998)

Of course, such mediating services can be improved when a clearing house moves on to a formalized organization based on regularized professional work.

This is exemplified by the *Institute for Global Communication (IGC)*<sup>9</sup> which functions as an umbrella gateway for Peacenet, Econet, Womensnet and Antiracistnet: four more specific clearing houses focusing on "social movement industries" – each of which composed of an immense and constantly changing galaxy of different committees, groupings and associations.

While mere clearing houses can only be used by individuals and groups equipped with all the necessary technologies and skills, such formal organizations can be active to make the Internet accessible to additional users (e. g. in poor southern countries), or by empowering existing users so that they can make better use of the new media (Myers 1998).

As they are reduced to a purely instrumental (even technical) function, such clearing organizations can host groups with a much wider spectrum of divergent values, ideologies and goals than any conventional movement organizations, and their survival is not threatened by even very profound changes in the social movement sector (Myers 1998). As such, they are ideally suited for fragmented modern movements not united by strong leadership or explicit ideological beliefs.

Given the fact that the same people are disposed for very different movements (McAdam 1986; Ryman 1992), such polyvalent virtual agencies are generalized meeting places for "movement-prone" individuals: informing them about new causes and mobilizing them for new collective actions and for the establishment of new groups:

*"Both direct involvement in conversations with other activists and simply reading announcements and information about protest activity can convince activists to take on new causes, develop new identities, and be socialized into new roles. This type of computer networking allows an individual access to information about new issues and movements while investing only small amounts of time and energy."* (Myers 1998)

Far from controlling the web publication strategies of their member organizations, highest-level national (or international) associations have a more modest function in

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.igc.org/igc/gateway/>

proposing common publication formats, and in promoting coherent and equilibrated web presentations (e. g. by offering incentives for still passive suborganizations or hesitant individual members).

Thus, the AFL-CIO has initiated its ambitious “working-families” project by offering cheap computers and low-price provider services to all its 13 Mio. Members. (Wagner 2000:7).

The manifest aims of this huge initiative are

- 1) to increase the share of internet users among unionized workers;
- 2) to focus the attention of users on its own organization, issues and activities (e. g. by presetting the browser in a way that the AFL-CIO-homepage is the start page which is loaded automatically whenever a user logs in).
- 3) to offer individual member unions good preconditions for opening their own portal sites comparable in style, but customized according to their specific topics and needs.

On the one hand, this strategy may well increase the linkage of individual members to the (hitherto very remote) national level of union organization.

But on the other hand, this highly centralized initiative is likely to give birth to a highly decentralized system of communication which will diminish the actual importance of the AFC-CIO: by emphasizing the autonomous identity of its different member organizations, which will again guide their users to even more decentralized levels (e. g. offering email accounts or attractive marketing opportunities; by providing links to local chapters, specialized workgroups or discussion forums, and particularly: by allowing everybody to “personalize” its page.).

### **3. The Internet as a Tool for Facilitating, Supporting and Enhancing F2F Interactions**

The sociological relevance of technical communication media would soon be exhausted if they would simply add new kinds of social interactions and relationships to a stable universe of already established non-technical communications.

Instead, their functional significance and causal impact is much enhanced by the fact that many (if not most) traditional relationships are at least indirectly affected by their presence.

Thus, informal group conversations in modern society are much shaped by the fact that participants possess common information because they have read the same newspapers or watched the same prime-time television broadcasts; and any kind of Rendez-vous will be affected by the partner’s previous exchanges by mailed letters or on the phone.

Contrary to letters or phones which affect mainly bilateral relationships, online communications are disposed to condition wider multilateral communication processes as they take place in group meetings or at larger gatherings (workshops, congresses, festivals) of any kind.

#### **1) Facilitation and catalyzation of physical gatherings**

While the exchange of email messages may certainly be a substitute for many cumbersome meetings at a fixed place on a fixed time, the same technology may also be functional for organizing such gatherings: e. g. by reaching many possible participants at very different places, exchanging opinions about optimal times and places, or by facilitating the diffusion of technical information about the modalities of the planned meeting (travel, accommodation, agenda, planar and workshop sessions etc etc.).

These capacities of the new media to facilitate and support physical gatherings has been impressively illustrated by the Mexican Zapatista Movement (EZLN) which succeeded in assembling its widespread supporters in two large intercontinental meetings (in Chiapas 1996 and in Spain 1997).

*“Through extensive E-mails and a small number of intermittent, face-to-face meetings, possible approaches to the organization of discussion were debated, agendas were hammered out and logistical arrangements were made. The results were stunning. Thousands came to the continental meetings--3,000 to the intercontinental meeting in Chiapas and 4,000 to the intercontinental reunion in Spain. Grassroots activists from over 40 countries and five continents attended both intercontinental meetings.”*

## **2) Embedment of F2F interactions in larger, richer and more extended communicative settings**

Whenever stable groups engage in continuous multilateral online communications, their face-to-face meetings will usually not be substituted, but reduced to more specialized functions.

Typically, the online communication provides an encompassing frame of interaction within which physical meetings are inserted like islands in a sea:

### *1) Temporal extension*

While physical meetings are restricted to specific times and places, online discussion can go on without interruption: before, during and after the face-to-face gatherings.

Given this temporal continuity, online communication is highly useful

a) for *preparing* meetings: by communicating “hot” topics of discussion, provide information useful to read before plenary discussions; making the structures and events of a planned meeting transparent so that participants can chose the lectures, discussion groups, workshops or poster sessions they plan to attend etc etc.

b) in the *aftermath* the meetings: by summarizing results, harvesting and evaluating the progress made during the transactions, providing opportunities for critical comments, making available important statements or lectures many participants didn’t attend because of conflicting time schedules or too early leaving. (Rosencrance 2000).

### *2) Expansion of social reach*

While physical meetings include only a section of all members (those able and willing to be at the given place on the prescribed hours or days), an online forum can include all the others as well. Thus, absentees can compensate for their ignorance by consulting the Web information, contacting people who *have* participated etc.

In addition, any meeting can be given a more public visibility: so that non-members (e.g. sympathizers considering future membership) can gain insight into the associational proceedings.

### *3) Expansion to other topics*

While time on physical meetings is usually so scarce that only some selected priority topics can be sufficiently discussed, anything else can be deliberated online without limits of session time. Thus, any group or organization can increase the total load of topics it discusses during a specific span of time, as well as the number of topics discussed simultaneously (e. g. in different listservs or newsgroup “threads”).

On all three dimensions, physical meetings may become more relaxed because their work loads (as well as the expectations of the members what should be accomplished) become significantly reduced.

Thus, sessions can be shorter because additional discussion can be transferred to later online communication; and people not able to make themselves heard need have still a significant voice in the online channels.

More than that, virtually embedded physical meetings may have less difficulty to start and proceed swiftly because they can build on many consensual premises and secure grounds of common understanding already established in advance.

For instance, decision-oriented deliberation processes may be pre-structured in a way that the session itself can focus exclusively on choosing among already highly specified options.

Of course, meetings may also be less attended because many members think that they can inform and articulate themselves sufficiently on the Net.

More and more, physical meetings will have to specialize on functions which cannot be easily fulfilled by online communication: e.g. in the case of non-standardized tasks where success highly depends on the transmission and evaluation of highly complex nonverbal cues.

Thus, gatherings in real space may always be indispensable when new candidates for leadership positions have to be evaluated and elected, or in the case of difficult negotiation processes where the outcome depends on highly informal exchanges and subtle interpersonal understandings.

#### *4) Facilitating open discussion by anonymizing contributions*

While all online communications tend to reduce the impact of personal characteristics (because cues like voice tone, bodily gestures, face expressions, gazings etc. cannot be transmitted), this effect of depersonalization can easily be enhanced by anonymizing incoming contributions (a feature offered by many groupware tools).

Anonymity may have at least two positive effects. *First*, it obliges all members to focus exclusively on the intrinsic content of messages, because their author is not known; and *secondly*, it encourages many more marginal members to express themselves freely: members who otherwise would remain mute because they anticipate that their suggestions will not be heard or turned down (Daly, 1996).

#### *5) Enhancing group effectiveness by facilitating the articulation and aggregation of opinions and preferences*

In face-to-face meetings, collective decisions are often made on the basis of rather insufficient knowledge of each individuals preferences and positions. Most often, many participants “agree” implicitly because they have no opportunities to voice their opinion, or because they don’t find it worthwhile to express overt dissent.

These low capacities of feeding individual opinions into the social system are particularly felt in the cases where the problem is not to decide about “yes or “no”, but to select

among a variety of alternatives, to create priority lists among different goals or activities, or to allocate scarce resources (time, money etc.) to different items.

In such cases where majority votings do not help, F2F groups are particularly undemocratic because discussions would go on indefinitely if members would not agree to accept a proposal stemming from a single individual (or a very small preparatory group) (Rauch 1983).

One of the most useful functions of multilateral online interaction (and one of the most helpful feature of most groupware tools) is to facilitate the explicit articulation and collective aggregation of individual preferences and priorities within a social group. This allows to catalyze collective decisions without curbing too much equal individual participation.

Thus, each individual can express fully its whole structure of preferences by ranking or scoring all alternatives, and by summarizing all these evaluations, a highly unbiased, equilibrated picture of the whole preference structure can be produced (Daly 1996). While it is still possible to give leaders more influence (e. g. by giving their evaluations double or triple weight), such inequalities are no longer introduced as uncontrollable exogenous factors (e. g. by the exercise of individual charisma of “persuasive power”), but in a fully intentional way: by means of explicit rules which can be generated and modified within the social system itself.

By applying such procedures, the participants themselves may be induced to behave in a more rational way:

*First of all*, each member is likely to engage in more intensive and extensive processes of subjective thought, in order to make up his mind on all alternatives and to sharpen his opinion and preferences to the point they can be made explicit.

*Secondly*, each member gets detailed information about the preferences of all other participants, so that they gain more mutual knowledge about each other. This may again facilitate future decision making because the group members see more clearly where they deviate and where they agree.

In short, online communication enables a group to combine high capacity for collective decisions (and action) with a high level of democratic (egalitarian) participation thus creating optimum conditions for high member motivation.

*Third*, the groups become more transparent for outsiders, because whenever priority and preference orders are established, they can be easily communicated to the environment. For voluntary associations, this means that ordinary members are better able to control the board or other decision making bodies, because the values, goals and priorities maintained by these bodies are more visible (so that they can better be contested)

And *forth*, collectivities may easily gain more consciousness and control about their own development during time, because these explicated evaluations are stored in documents which can later easily be retrieved. Thus, groups become better able to relate to their own history: either by continuing or by discontinuing explicitly traditional practices or rules and preferences they have fixed in the past,

#### **4. Better conditions for combining associational participation with any environmental conditions, social roles and personal activities**

Online communication channels improve the capacity of individuals to participate in any collective endeavors without leaving their actual physical environment and without discontinuing their habituated activities and roles.

Thus, they allow involvements in public actions which do not presuppose any appearance in public places and which give not rise to any kind of new physical groups or formal organization.

*“This privatization of public participation, as it were, as one usually uses a computer alone, even if not in the ‘privacy of one’s own home’, makes the use of email politically different from many other forms of political action, suggesting that cyberspace may be conceived as both public and private space.” (Stubbs 1998; Fernback 1997:p.39)*

In particular, the Internet allows a new way of public participation which is absolutely compatible with a completely privatized way of life: sitting in front of the computer at home.

In a very general way, this smooth embedment of online communication in any offline settings increases the capacity of individuals to participate in voluntary associations, because such volunteering activities become more compatible with any given environmental circumstances and simultaneous full participation in other (e. g. professional) settings.

Thus, anybody using a computer in his job is easily capable to maintain email contacts with a distant association without leaving his work place, without even interrupting the normal flow of work. Consequently, more intensive and more rapid intra-associational communication processes can be enacted even during daytime office hours, while in the past, any volunteering activity was restricted to hours after work. For instance, medical doctors acting as board members of their professional association are able to interact with other board members without disrupting their ability to see patients (Shuping 1998). And for union members, , websites can be highly accessible gateways for getting into contact with “their organization” just on their place of work. Office employees in particular may use their netted PC to contact their Union during work hours – insofar as employers are prone (or legally forced) to allow such kinds of uses.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to most traditional forms of political protest, which most often were restricted to people living in cities and assembling for public manifestations, online communication opens up a wide various forms of “*electronic civil disobedience*” highly accessible to every Net User anytime and anywhere in the world. In the form of spamming, hacking, denial of service operations or other illicit procedures, these activities can be done in secrecy, without going at specific places and without assuming unconventional social roles. Thus, they can be executed by hundred thousands of individuals wholly conformist in all other respects: like the millions loading down illegal MP3-files from Napster or Gnutella without the slightest pricks of conscience.

This increased interpenetration between associations and other social settings may result in four consequences:

1) ***The handicaps of pure volunteer associations (not employing any full-time staff) may become less pronounced***, because their functionaries gain the capacity of being active for their organization at any time during the day.

2) ***The interaction between volunteers and full-time staff within associations may increase***. In particular, boards and other bodies composed of non-paid members can increase their reach and influence dramatically, because even distant members absorbed

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<sup>10</sup> At this time (Febr. 2001). A legal battle is pendent between the Washington Post and the union of media workers about the right of unions to contact their members at their place of work.

by their professional work are able to maintain continuous intensive contact with each other as well with professional personnel at the headquarters (Shuping 1998). Consequently, the autonomy and power of staff may decline, while the influence of rank-and-file membership (articulating themselves either directly or through their representative bodies) increases.

**3) *Interactions between pure voluntary associations and professional organizations (like firms, schools, hospitals, insurance companies, law firms etc.) may increase, because normal office hours can be used for interaction.***

**4) *Online communications can neutralize the oligarchic effects resulting from the decline of meetings (and meeting attendance).***

Today's associations make the experience that it becomes more and more difficult to assemble their members in physical meetings, because people today have so many other role duties and so many alternative ways to spend their leisure time. As a consequence, even democratically-minded collectivities end up to be quite oligarchic because all the work has to be done by very few active (formally responsible) members:

*“The hardest problem facing any organization is securing attendance at its meetings, especially now when both parents in families are likely to work and need their evenings to spend time with their children. It's rare for a group to get together more than once a month, and even these occasions involve only a small portion of the membership. The result is that boards and committees end up doing most of the work, which is then conveyed to the membership via a newsletter.” (Schwartz 1995)*

Given this declining frequency and attendance of meeting, less active rank-and-file members lose their only channels for exerting any kind of influence on their association. Under these conditions, online communication can be a remedy because all members gain the opportunity of getting informed and making their voice heard – independently of any participation in physical gatherings.

## **5. Increased capacities to organize widely dispersed and irregularly moving members**

By freeing system accessibility from spatial and temporal constraints, computer-supported interaction facilities widen the reach of associational integration to highly “precarious” population segments hard to organize because of their dispersed (or irregularly changing) geographical location.

This may explain why net communication has gained a particular significance for labor unions in the traffic and transport sector (e. g. the International Transport Workers Federation ITF), and why the “United Food and Commercial workers” is getting about 150-200 email messages each day from (mainly rural) workers who utter complaints and ask for information or help.<sup>11</sup>

Online interactions are particularly useful for *occupational* unions which are usually highly centralized because the widely dispersed membership has rather low capacities for horizontal interaction (Raphael 1965). In comparison, unions organizing employees of the

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<sup>11</sup> “Labor Unions Turn to Cyberspace” (Associated Press 3. Sept. 2000; 13.07).

same industry (or firms) are better able to base their integration on conventional assemblies and informal group interaction (e. g. within specific enterprises).<sup>12</sup>

Net interaction can become especially crucial when union members (or functionaries) cannot be reached regularly by telephone, FAX or posted mail letters at a specific place, because they are working on different locations and at irregular times. Under such conditions, e-mail (or SMS messages delivered to cellular phones) are highly functional because they can be retrieved anytime and anywhere by their receivers.

*"Kathy Becker, The Bullitt Foundation's program officer, says that the Web isn't just for big organizations. "The most grassroots, lowest-funded, rural groups are the ones embracing this technology the fastest," she says. "They're the groups that have had the biggest communications problems: everyone works, so there's nobody available from 9 to 5, and everything gets done by letter or FAX. "" (Motavalli 1996)*

Thus, one of the major uses of the Canadian "Solinet" is to make educational programs accessible to employees working during night hours or at changing locations.<sup>13</sup>

It is no surprise to find that associations in countries with widely dispersed populations (like Canada or Russia) are particularly prone to use the new media for purposes of organizational integration. Thus, one of the most significant Netsites in the realm of labor unions (Solinet) has been established by the Canadian Union of Public Employees as early as 1986. Its explicit goal was to bring the 2200 local groups separated by immense distances (and six time zones) into regular contact with each other (as well as with the organizational center in Ottawa). Similarly, the Russian "Labour information Center" (KASKOR) – established at Moscow in 1990 – has the function of bridging the spatial distances between the diverse local subunits on the one hand and of diminishing the isolation of Russian unions vis-à-vis Western countries on the other.<sup>14</sup>

For similar technical reasons, the Internet can catalyze additional processes of collectivization by filtering out exactly those few (mutually unacquainted) individuals most prone to associate because they share the same specialized interests or are hit by an identical problems: regardless of their distribution in time and space.

This is seen in the case of *consumers* who find new ways to aggregate their grievances and file collective complaints. Typically customers experiencing similar problems with the same brand of car, bicycle, restaurant, medical drug, hairdresser or refrigerator find themselves alone with their complaints, because they don't know other buyers of the same product or services. Thus, even highly generalized product deficiencies may not give rise to collective protest activities to which the firm has to be responsive: so that firms lack not only the *motivation*, but even the basic *information* needed in order to correct mistakes and improve their productions.

The Internet instead facilitates the mutual perception and collective organization of any individuals hit by the same dissatisfactions, disregarding their dispersion in space as well as their lack of common attributes in all other respects.

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<sup>12</sup> This may explain why American Unions – which are mainly firm-oriented organizations – don't make much use of online communication up to the present.

<sup>13</sup> Bulletin of the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations, 3, December 1993. "Computer Communications and the Labour Movement", <http://www.poptel.org.uk/ifwea/ifwwe03.html>

<sup>14</sup> Bulletin of the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations, 3, December 1993. "Computer Communications and the Labour Movement", <http://www.poptel.org.uk/ifwea/ifwwe03.html>

Thus, when the owner of a Ford Winstar who had experienced an engine problem opened a Website, a large number of others hit by the same problem added their grievances, so that a successful class action suit against Ford Motor Corporation could be enacted (Truby and Dina ElBoghdady 2000).

Generally the Internet helps to sort out problems which are idiosyncratic and occur accidentally (e. g. by unskilled handling of a bough tool or machinery) and which of them have a more systematic cause (e. g. located in intrinsic deficiencies of a specific product). Thus, it facilitates the emergence of “class suit actions” readily taken up by consumer advocates and lawyers ( Truby and Dina ElBoghdady 2000). In fact, “Class suit actions” are highly symbiotic with the Internet, because they can be enacted by mere aggregates of individuals, not organized formally into any type of association. Consequently, corporations are well advised to watch regularly the discussions led in specialized newsgroups in order to follow developments in their public reputation and to become alerted early enough when potentially dangerous issues are in the rise.

While including meanwhile more than 400 Mio direct users, the indirect impacts of the Net on collective organization extend even further to more marginal segments of the population: : e.g. on wives of e-mailing husbands or on the grannies of computer-savvy kids.

In a worldwide perspective, the Internet community maintains a very broad interface to the “non-internetted” environment: e.g. rural or southern populations not yet equipped with PC’s, Modems and telephone lines.

While no TV reporter or press journalist will ever appear in these surroundings in order to listen to the people and transport their views to the “big media”, it is far more probable that these people find some active Internet Users capable and motivated to help them to feed their hand- or typewritten hardcopy messages into the worldwide digital system.

Thus, some of the most successful examples of political Internet use concern populations at the very margin of civilization:

1) Opposition groups in Burma are communicating their messages orally to people in Thailand border villages which then feed it into the net (Fink 1997).

2) The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas (Southern Mexico) who gained its fascinating worldwide reputation (as the spearhead of a new anti-neoliberalist movement) exclusively by the help of a large number of volunteering intermediaries from various Western countries:

*“It is important to note that the EZLN has played no direct role in the proliferation of the use of the Internet. Rather, these efforts were initiated by others to weave a network of support for the Zapatista movement. Although there is a myth that Zapatista spokesman Subcommandante Marcos sits in the jungle uploading EZLN communiqués from his laptop, the reality is that the EZLN and its communities have had a mediated relationship to the Internet.*

*The Zapatista communities are indigenous, poor and often cut-off not only from computer communications but also from the necessary electricity and telephone systems. Under these conditions, EZLN materials were initially prepared as written communiqués for the mass media and were handed to reporters or to friends to give to reporters. Such material then had to be typed or scanned into electronic format for distribution on the Internet.”*  
(Clever 1998)

But there is a price to pay for such exogenous advocacy services: the movement itself is incapable of controlling the flows of information, of determining how it will present itself to the World Public. In fact, a rich variety of EZLN sites has developed which produce so much noise in the system that the “authentic” voices of the genuine protagonists can hardly be heard.

Nevertheless, the conclusion has to be drawn that the Internet may well have an extensive impact on the whole mankind, because even highly marginal population segments profit at least indirectly from it: by having relationships to sympathetic users.

Seen from the other side, idealistic activists all over the world find much better opportunities for advocating the interests of any groups they especially like. Given that access to the Net gets easier and cheaper every day, it may be expected that such mediated “advocacy articulations” are typical for a short transitory phase in the worldwide expansion of the Net. In fact, they may be functional of making even poorest people at least basically acquainted with the Net, and of diffusing knowledge and skills to future users.

Finally, the Internet may help to level differences between urban and rural regions which have often been a source of inequalities, cleavages and factionalism in conventional voluntary associations.

In the past, large-scale collective action was often restricted to very big cities: because only in such urban settings there was a necessary number of people sharing the same grievances and the same ideological views. Whenever such populations were geographically dispersed, collective gatherings were either impossible or had to be restricted to rare special occasions (e. g. by organizing a “march to Washington”). By contrast, the online communication can bring such dispersed people into closer contact without physical proximity: so that future social movements may be less restricted to densely populated areas or to such very special periods of time (Myers 1998).

Traditional labor unions for example have conserved an “urban bias” to the extent that many specialized functions (counseling, educational courses etc.) could only be provided in densely populated areas where experts are available and where a sufficient number of participants can be expected. Through online interaction, such services can now be extended to all members alike. Thus, Canadian Unions use “Solinet” to make educational programs accessible to workers living in distant Northern and Western provinces: with the effect that academic teachers in the Toronto headquarters can be more efficiently employed.<sup>15</sup>

“Solinet” also illustrates that such professionals can be recruited from (and be located in) broader geographical regions because they can cooperate intensively even if they live in very different places.<sup>16</sup>

On a more general level, it might be concluded that the Internet makes voluntary associations freer to allocate their resources and choose their organizational structures at their will – irrespective of environmental societal conditions. In particular, they become able to maintain high levels of functional differentiation even when they operate in very large and highly fragmented territorial settings.

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<sup>15</sup> dito

<sup>16</sup> dito

## **6. Increased interaction and mutual learning between collateral territorial subunits**

Online connections open the way for fruitful communication processes between associational members and/or subunits which have hitherto been isolated from each other by physical or socio-cultural barriers. This is particularly relevant in the case of highly segmented associations composed of physically segregated subunits with identical functions and tasks.

One of the most common form of social life is that several individuals, groupings or organizational units do almost identical things: each in relationship to its own clientele or within its own spatial or temporal jurisdiction. Thus, schools are segmented into classes, parties into election districts, hospitals into wards, churches into parishes, and nations into provinces and communities, medical professions into galaxies of finely distributed individual practitioners etc.

Typically, such segmented systems are characterized by rather low levels of horizontal interaction, because each unit is basically equipped with all skills and resources for solving its own problems, and most of these can be dealt with without engaging into higher-level co-operative action. For the same reasons, vertical relationships between subunits and higher hierarchical levels (e. g. between parish and diocese) are rather scanty, because subunits are basically self-sufficient and easy to be supervised (so that span of control can be rather high).

As a consequence, direct as well as indirect communication channels connecting the parallel action units are either lacking completely or used only in rare cases, and assemblies often take place for predominantly expressive and ritualistic reasons, not for solving instrumental tasks.

Therefore, such parallel units are not likely to learn from each other, despite the fact that they are permanently confronted with similar tasks and problems which necessitate the same knowledge and skills. Thus, they are disposed to be left alone with their particular problems: always repeating the same errors, drawing the same inductive conclusions and inventing the same helpful procedures without their more experienced distant partners, and without accumulating a collective stock of knowledge which could be made available to others.

In these cases, computer aided information systems can be extremely helpful, because they allow all parallel subunits to be permanently accessible for mutual communication while they remain fully active in their role and completely integrated in their own rayon of jurisdiction.

For the first time in their history, organizations with divisional segmentations and distributed environments thus get tools for systematic organizational learning: enabling them to make full use of any experiences, suggestions and innovations originating from anywhere "at the front".

As the occurring problems (and their solutions) are often quite repetitive, excellent conditions exist for storing all incoming information in a structured, constantly growing "organizational memory" which embodies the collectivized experiences of the past in highly explicit and accessible form (e. g. as an expert system) (Goodman/Darr 1998). *"Computer-aided systems for organizational learning share some features with traditional e-mail systems such as the capability of bridging space and time. However, they differ from e-mail systems in the following respects: There is a memory device with indexing systems and search aids accessible and known to all members. There is a mechanism where all organizational members can dynamically share and update*

*solutions. These systems also differ from "news groups" or "bulletin boards" because the process for selecting items for the organizational memory, updating these items, or broadcasting the availability of these items is more formalized, structured, and may use various forms of intelligent aids." (Goodman/Darr 1998)*

Of course, only rather standardized and formalized knowledge can reach this highly externalized form, while more informal, tacit knowledge either remains connected to the subunit where it has been generated or can be transmitted only through rather elaborate and cumbersome processes of horizontal communication:

*"Some problem statements and their environmental conditions may be difficult to articulate. Similarly, rules for implementing a solution may be understood, but it may be difficult to articulate why certain rules fit some solutions and not others. In both of these cases, the process of contribution among geographically distributed units will be difficult. The contributor cannot articulate the key elements of the exchange. Since the contributor and adopter are geographically separated, learning via observation or apprenticeship are less feasible options. In this situation, it will be difficult to create an organizational memory of shared interpretative schemes." (Goodman/Darr 1998)*

Of course, the mere availability of cross-unit communication is no guarantee that it effectively does occur, because such intraorganizational exchanges are usually not supported by habit, norms or positive incentives.

In order to exploit these new technological capacities, new norms and motivation systems have to be created, so that contributors to the organizational memories are sufficiently rewarded (e. g. by special bonus payments and/or a higher overall status within the organization) (Goodman/Darr 1998).

## **7. More heterogeneous publics, diversified support bases and broadened definitions of issues.**

All public net communications of organizations and associations are "Janus-faced" in the sense that the communications can be received (and answered) by internal members and any outsiders alike. In the past, this public visibility was restricted by the fact that many associations (e. g. unions) have used particularistic proprietary software and net protocols: so that communication was automatically kept within system boundaries. Today instead, the ubiquitous switch to universal Internet protocols has created a situation of "over-publicness" as all information is open for everybody insofar as they are not protected by sophisticated - and never fully hacker-proof - technological measures (like compulsory registration, passwords, firewalls or encryption).

An important function of Net publicity is to keep associational matters constantly visible to the world public - irrespective of the ebb and flow of mass media reporting.

Whenever social movements, unions or other associations engage in public actions, the impact of such undertakings is highly dependent on their coverage in the major mass media: the daily press, radio and television. But most frequently, media attention focuses on rather narrow time spans (e. g. the initial phases of a strike), and many actions highly salient in the eyes of their originators get no coverage at all.

Online publication channels help to transport all news an association considers relevant into the public sphere, so that ongoing activities and events are evenly covered even at times they evoke no attention in a wider public. Apart from the participants themselves who may be most motivated to expose themselves to such sites, such news reporting may also be followed by journalists – who then may become more prone to give them a place

in the major mass media. In fact, associations may design their Web communications with a strong eye on journalists and other “multipliers” as potential receivers.

As a consequence, most Websites are created with a complex mix of considerations: how does the conveyed information meet the expectations and needs of core members, activists, peripheral members, external sympathizers, adherents of competitive or oppositional organizations – and how is it received the general ever growing Web Public all over the world?

As the messages and information originally designed for members can be addressed to any outsiders without additional costs, voluntary associations have an easy task of making their goals and activities known to a wider audience and to widen their societal legitimacy and reputation,

*“...activists also have an opportunity to send their message to "third party audiences", that is, people not directly involved in their own organization. Gaining at least silent support for a movement's goals and actions is essential for movement success.*

*Although Amnesty International's overt attempt seems to be to find letter writers, the latent effect of their solicitations is to spread information about the appalling conditions, torture, and human rights violations endured by political prisoners throughout the world. The result is strong pro-Amnesty International feelings that lend strength to the Amnesty International agenda.” (Myers 1998)*

Apart from contributing to the societal legitimacy of the movement (by involving a tacit public which provides at least passive support by not challenging its existence or policies), such increases in external visibility also have the function of drawing more sympathizers and members to the movement. In fact, the size of formal membership may not increase so much as the number of sympathetic outsiders which – while remaining at the fringe - provide at least temporary support (for single purposes or at special occasions).

Such heterogeneous, polymorphic audiences can be functional for creating new solutions, and for exploiting new kinds of solidarities not present in conventional social structures. In the case of Ex Yugoslavia, for instance, it was highly important to draw on women’s groups which always had maintained all – Yugoslav channels of communication in times their male counterparts were absorbed by divisive nationalist interactions (Stubbs 1998).

*“A wide range of anti-war groups, particularly associated with the Anti-war Campaign in Croatia (ark@zamir.net), based in Zagreb, and the Centre for Anti-War Action in Serbia, based in Belgrade, but also women's groups, ecology groups, humanitarian agencies, and countless individuals, used zamir during the war years.” (Stubbs 1998)*

In contrast to classical wars which were “international” or domestic (in the case of civil wars) modern wars are mostly “intermestic” in the sense that they involve many nongovernmental actors of various countries (Pugh 1998).

The Internet supports such transnational networking on subgovernmental levels, as has been shown in its role in the recent Yugoslav wars:

*“The involvement of a wide range of international agencies, of activists and volunteers and, indeed, of various Diaspora communities, are key features of the wars of the Yugoslav succession.” (Stubbs 1998)*

Compared with conventional mass media, online communication also makes it easier for associations to serve different language groups, because no separate publications and distribution networks have to be established:

When conventional technologies are used, to produce a printed publication in a second or third language today requires not only that the material be translated, but also typeset, printed and mailed. Once publications go online, all those other costs drop to zero, so that the available money can fully be used for translation costs. An international organization that wants to stop its post-mailed hardcopy newsletter on paper might find that with the same money formerly spent for paper, printing and distribution, it can now afford to publish online editions in various languages simultaneously. Insofar as automated translation software will make progress, (what is unsure at the moment), even these translation costs may considerably decrease.

Consequently, many more associations than today may try to grow by diversifying their audiences far beyond the Anglo-Saxon regions by appealing to populations in all parts of the worlds. Given the interactive nature of the Internet, it is to be expected that such associations are likely to become multicultural (or “multidomestic”) in the genuine sense: by engaging in communications with different audiences and by being influenced and shaped by various cultural settings. For certain, these global multicultural associations will enter into competition with endogenous organizations within different localities, nations and regions, thus setting them under pressure to do more than before for keeping (or even enlarging) their spatially defined audience.

As all other Web publishers, associations operate under the basic condition that Net communications are received by a widely dispersed public whose size and composition cannot be known in advance and will be highly variable over time. As this implies the chance of finding unexpected sympathizers and supporters never located by any offline media, it carries also the risk of hurting various sensitivities, evoking misunderstandings or of conveying a public image not consistent with official corporate identities and associational goals.

No group engaging in public online discussion can shield itself against (unwanted) external participants, so that they too often become highly heterogeneous and ideologically blurred.

In the case of the Yugoslav “zamir” network, this permeability resulted in a high participation of emigrants not committed to the political goals of the domestic groupings, but only motivated to keep up personal contacts with home.

*“One of the side effects of the economic crisis and sanctions in Serbia was that, ironically, zamir was one of the few avenues available through which messages could be sent to friends around the world, so that zamir had a much larger number of users who were not committed to its broader social goals and used it, simply, as a vehicle to maintain their social networks.” (Stubbs 1998)*

On the other hand, domestic antinationalist movements can easily be discredited by nationalist groups when they can show that they enjoy high external support (even from populations of enemy countries).

*“It is certainly the case that, within any of the post-Yugoslav countries in conflict, outside support for particular kinds of 'anti-nationalist' discourses have, at best, had little wider effect and, at worst, have been used by dominant forces to spread mistrust of any such movement.” (Stubbs 1998)*

In their famous strike action conducted in 1997, the Liverpool dockers have used the Internet successfully for mobilizing support from various unforeseen sources, and for catalyzing solidary relationships with many environmental actors hitherto completely unrelated to unions:

*“Like the indigenous peasants of South Western Mexico, they are realizing the power of the latest means of communication to create a new global solidarity. The email list created for the dockers has permitted not only exchange of information and appeals for solidarity; it has also provided an open space in which international debate on the conflict could take place between workers, national and international union officers...and even left academics!” (Waterman 1999).*

But exactly such interferences make it increasingly unlikely that any conflict originating within a union will be kept within its neatly defined limits: as a quarrel between specific workers and specific employers on a specific issue at a specific point of time. Instead, there will be a tendency to enlarge and generalize it in terms of time, space scope and topical reach: e. g. by asserting that the issue exemplifies the harsh consequences generally associated with neoliberal globalization.

When this happens, it is highly probable that the main influence accrues to rather elitist intellectual movement activists who integrate the union issue into their more universalistic and strategic interpretative frames.

As a consequence, labor conflicts become parts of a *“multi-leveled, multi-faceted, multi-directional internationalism, recognizing a multiplicity of problems, subjects and movements, aware of globalisation, oriented to the development of an alternative sense of global community/culture, institutionalised in some kind of global civil society or alternative world order (many international ecological, peace, women's movements, international non-governmental organizations).” (Waterman 1999).*

There are only very few, highly generalized common values holding all these divergent initiatives together: mainly their consensual opposition against multinational corporate power.

*“Alleged abuse of corporate power by multinationals is the basic focus of protest activity. Large corporations with international undertakings stand accused of social injustice, unfair labour practices— including slave labour wages, living and working conditions— as well as a lack of concern for the environment, mismanagement of natural resources, and ecological damage.*

*Anti-globalization demonstrations have achieved worldwide support partly because the target, per se, its representatives, and its effects are global in nature. Major brand names, among them Nike, Starbucks, McDonalds, and Shell Oil, are principal targets, ironically because their massive advertising campaigns designed to engender public prominence have been successful—and that status is being used to highlight the charges brought against them.” (CSIS 2000).*

As a consequence, the Net seems to encourage “wholistic campaigns” against large corporations: confronting them with all their faulty actions and negative impacts not only on their employees, but as well on their customers, their host communities and the general public.

This is vividly illustrated by “MacSpotlight.com” which focuses on McDonalds as a company which violates moral and legal standards in many different societal and cultural realms.

*“When McDonalds sued a pair of humble environmental activists in England, little did they realize the creative forces that would be unleashed in opposition to the mega junk food chain. The McSpotlight web site has been visited by tens of millions of persons. (2 million per month for almost a year). Like the original brochure which was the target of*

*the libel suit, this handy site has concrete facts on the environmental impact of the burger industry, the debased labor involved in their sales, the seduction of children with unhealthy food habits and many other greasy sins.”(Halleck 1999).*

Such Sites have become an almost institutional quality as a “vigilant opposition” which may well motivate the targeted firm to behave in a more disciplined (certainly: low-profiled) manner.

Due to the heterogeneity and variability of participant groupings, the new anti-globalization movement is seen as a fear-inspiring source of unpredictable eruptions. This is certainly justified insofar as the movement is not able to insulate itself from highly dangerous radical groupings prone to engage in violent actions:

*“The global parameters have encouraged disparate groups and individuals to participate in the demonstrations. In Seattle and Washington, for example, the wide variety of parading malcontents evoked the eclectic ambience of a “protest county fair.”*

*Circumstances also have promoted the involvement of fringe extremists who espouse violence, largely represented by Black Bloc anarchists and factions of militant animal-rights and environmental activists.*

*The melding of various elements and establishing of strange-bedfellow ties at individual demonstrations have contributed both to the impact and the unique character of the events.” (CSIS 2000).*

While the melding of many different groups inflates the size of the movement and thus creates an impression of power, it diminishes the chances of success because it is extremely difficult to come to terms on common values, goals and strategies of collective action.

More than that, the anarchistic emphasis on spontaneity and “direct action” hampers all efforts of potential “social entrepreneurs” to create structure and organization which would be necessary for creating concentrated pressure on neatly defined opponents for reaching specific goals, and for enabling the movement to enter into formal talks or negotiations:

*“While diversity has contributed to modernizing and strengthening protests and demonstrations, new tactics and technology, collectively and individually, have radically changed the face of protest activity and generated renewed life in the reality of demonstrations. Gone are old-style gatherings confined to waving placards and banners, declaiming speakers, and moderate, controlled marches in specific locations. Not unlike the massive and often vigorous Out of Vietnam and Ban the Bomb protests of the ‘60s and ‘70s decades, today’s demonstrations, resurrecting the anarchist theme of “direct action,” employ a host of novel methodologies that have given a whole new complexion to the nature of the protests.” (CSIS 2000)*

On the other hand, the pluralistic structure of the new movements is a good precondition for their longer-term survival and constant growth, because each participating group is likely to find additional sympathizers supporters for their specific issues in surrounding society, and because countervailing forces find it hard to organize when no precisely identifiable targets for their fight (e. g. a specific “subversive goal” or “false ideology”) can be assessed.

From the point of view of a labour union, for instance, the rise of such “polyvalent campaigns” means that their own issues become part of much more encompassing movement activities co-determined by a plethora of widely diverging (and constantly changing) groups.

Contrary to formal organizations which tend to stabilize rules and policies rather independently from the ebb and flow of subjective member motivations, these new movements remain highly responsive to any changes on these volatile psychological levels.

As a consequence, they may be less able than in the past to articulate pure “labor” interests disregarding the interest of other stakeholders (e. g. consumers, tax payers or people suffering from ecological damages). Instead, they will have to synthesize their demands with the (partially harmonizing and partially conflicting) goals of other groupings, and participate in the formation of highly integrated strategic action platforms on which all these groupings can agree and join their efforts in solitary action.

*“It appears that, in the new media, labour is being not so much represented, by unions or socialist parties, it is being re-presented by radical, democratic and maybe even small-s socialist activists: like the CCC above, which works with open-minded unions but on consumers, not in workplaces or union offices, but outside the stores and in the shopping malls. Then there is Deedee Halleck, veteran of Paper Tiger TV in the US, on on-line resistance to the prison-industrial (labour) complex - now spreading worldwide. And those working with video with immigrants (working, work-seeking),*

*under the slogan ‘No Human is Illegal’. And Rachel Baker from the UK, with her attempt to computer-subvert the major British supermarket chains (where workers work and buy), by interfering with their ‘loyalty cards’ (and getting threatened by their lawyers for her pains). Not to speak of the now world famous campaign of two British working-class activists against MacDonalDs, which rapidly got on to the internet and video, and led this goliath to spend millions to indict them (workers work in MacD, workers eat in MacD). Not to speak of the anarcho-ecological Reclaim the Streets campaign, a now worldwide direct-action movement, only four years old, which believes streets should be public-human-space and not*

*private-auto-space, and who lent their disrespect for authority, and their capacity for making a joyful noise, to the striking Liverpool dockworkers, at a time when their trade unions - from the local to the global level - were finding 101 good reasons to ignore, condemn or control it.” (Waterman 1999).*

A special case of “movement polymorphism” is manifested in the growing intermingling between local, regional and global levels of protest activities and organization. While in the past, the slogan “think globally, act locally”, denoted a rather clear separation between these two spheres, we now see the emergence of polymorphic movements which act locally and globally at the same time.

The *Zapatista Movement* for instance was “Janus-faced” from the beginning: combining its limited goals within domestic Mexican Politics with a more global identity: seeing itself as the “spearhead” of a new anti-neoliberalist movement.

As to be expected, this second face was highly stressed by the many international groupings which gave the Chiapas fighters its support:

*“In Mexico, a mix of subnational and transnational actors have mounted a social netwar against a state lagging at democratisation. The netwar appears in the decentralized collaboration among the numerous, diverse Mexican and transnational (mostly U.S. and Canadian) activists who side with the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), and who aim to affect government policies, on human rights, democracy and other major reform issues. Mexico . . . is now the scene of a prototype for social netwar in the 21st century.” (Arquilla/Ronfeld 1996:p.73)*

Of course, this trend toward globalization is facilitated by preexisting factors unrelated to the Internet: the increasing global homogenization of political and economic action strategies on the one hand and the resulting homogeneity of collective (class) interests on the other:

*“These new global conflicts have involved cross-fertilization and the combination of energies generated by local roots. In general we can say that local conflicts between citizen groups and governments have expanded into global efforts in response to two things: first, to a spreading uniformity of policies and international agreements among governments to implement world-wide sets of rules and second, to the resultant perception of common interests in challenging not only those rules but any set of uniform mandates unrelated to local situations.”*

*“The spreading uniformity of economic and social policies has been re-crafted over the last twenty years from the top down in ways more and more in line with "neoliberalism". The increasingly homogeneous character of policy across the face of the earth has created a situation where more and more people, over wider and wider areas, despite geographic, linguistic and cultural differences, have come to formulate a common opposition to these policies and to take more and more widely linked action against them.” (Cleaver 1999)*

While it is to be agreed that net communication can eventually polarize opinions and radicalize users (e. g. in emotionalized “flamings”), it is also true that it can encourage movements and organizations to de-emphasize uncompromising positions and sharp ideological edges: thus contributing to a moderated climate of opinions which can be the breeding ground for consensual understanding among even highly opposed social actors.

Reacting to their unusual degree of exposure, most groupings and associations thus try to avoid too autocratic, one-sided or even extremist articulations, and to maximize public legitimacy by focusing on more moderated and universalistic values and norms (like those expounded in documents of the UN, the ILO and other highly reputable international organizations).

Thus, whenever local or regional movements try to make use of this potential, they may be eager to emphasize their more universalistic goals: e. g. by defining their local problems as a part (or symptomatic manifestation) of much larger global problem, and by linking their tactical actions to more encompassing strategic considerations.

## **8. Expanding the sphere of “latent relationships” and “weak social ties”**

Written online messages (e-mail, newsgroup or chat contributions) are ideally suited to initiate contacts between hitherto completely unrelated partners, or to maintain very weak relationships by occasional and irregular communications.

There are two reasons for this:

- 1) The investments in money, time, skills and work efforts are so low that they can easily be directed at any number of distant or unknown receivers, even if their probability of responding is very low.
- 2) In sharp contrast to telephoning, online messages are extremely non-intrusive because receivers can retrieve, read, store (or delete) and answer them at any chosen time.

Thus, a major significance of email lies in its capacity expanding the most peripheral sphere of very weak and irregularly activated social relations:: by establishing a broad reservoir of “latent ties” which then can be selectively exploited according to changing situations and needs: e.g. for exploring whether anybody exists who is ready to help or cooperate or who possesses a highly specific kind of information.

As a consequence, individuals as well as organizations

- a) have a larger number of potential interaction partners at their disposal: so that they can better optimize their interactions according to their current needs;
- b) will be contacted by a larger number of (quite unpredictable) partners, so that he/she has to accept a more complex, volatile and unpredictable social environment.

In daily organizational operations, email may be particularly fruitful when it is important to tap additional pools of knowledge, to enlarge the spectrum of alternatives for solving certain problems, to explore new unknown ways to do things, or to deal with idiosyncratic problems which have never been coped with in the past (Haythornthwaite 1999)

In all these cases, online channels offer a ready way to mobilize optimal information and knowledge sources from outside the organization (while the use of second-order experts which happen to be in the system may decline).

Consequently, knowledge diffusion between organizations is increased, and each organization may be able to reduce some of its specialized staff, because any specific information can easily be received from external sources whenever the need arises.

Similarly, the Net encourages associations to become extremely inclusive and “exoteric” by appealing to expand its public visibility and support bases to additional, hitherto ignored population segments (or organizations).

Thus, international labour unions like the ICEM use the Internet mainly for enlarging the geographical reach of interorganizational relationships than for intensifying existing bonds:

*"Since the ICEM pages on the worldwide Web were launched at the ICEM Executive Committee at its first meeting June 6-8, 1996 at Izmir, Turkey we have seen the organizing and campaigning potential of the Internet as the most exciting and powerful uses of the technology. Interest in our site has been global with users from 73 identifiable countries having accessed our pages since their launch. We believe that the Internet has allowed us to reach a wider audience and readership than that of our printed publications and traditional press releases. This audience is increasing all of the time. Beginning with just over 100 hits a day in June 1996 the site in October 1997 was accessed an average of over 1,000 times a day."*<sup>17</sup>

Given the easy methods for counting page impressions, there is a seducing tendency to identify the success of a Webpage with the number of “hits” or the variety of visitors it attracts – and much less with its real impacts which may be more difficult to verify. But apart from these quantifiable aspects, success may arrive in the form of unforeseen expressions of sympathy and support from surprising sources, or in the form of unexpected new suggestions and proposals which may widen the realm of strategic goals or operative actions.

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.icem.org/campaigns/no\\_pay\\_cc/internet.html](http://www.icem.org/campaigns/no_pay_cc/internet.html)

Exactly this has happened to the ICEM when it campaigned in order to sensitize world public opinion for the precarious situation of Russian workers who didn't get their pay for many consecutive months:

*"Feedback has been considerable as well. Messages have been overwhelmingly supportive with well over 200 received at the time of writing. They have come from the US and Canada, from Latin America and Europe as well as from the Russian Federation itself. They have varied enormously and included offers of financial support, holidays and even export contracts for coal - with guaranteed wage funds for miners, as well as general expressions of outrage and disgust at the scandalous situation. We have discovered that a theatre group in Stockholm, hearing of the campaign via an e-mail distributed Swedish newsletter on Russia, has raised money to donate to the unpaid miners."*<sup>18</sup>

**Interorganizational alliances and cooperations** typically take the shape of rather loose, decentralized networks based on the principle of mutual respect between strong autonomous actors who insist on their own goals and who cultivate their own environmental relations.

This condition makes them very prone to use computer-mediated communication because it allows intensive communicative exchange without the restrictions and obliging involvement typically associated with face to face meetings or more formal kinds of written communication. Thus, online interaction is ideally suited to initiate and maintain large scale interorganizational relationships of an informal, non-contractual kind: loose connections constantly respecified according to current developments and needs. This is illustrated again by the Canadian "Solinet" which functions as a communicative link between labor unions, political parties, educational institutions and public administration – actors which may never have initiated contact on other, more conventional levels of communication (Lee 1993).<sup>19</sup>

As such weak links provide a pool of latent supportive relationships which can be actualized quickly wherever the need arrives, they open the way for more extensive solidarity networks (and may thus well decrease the organization's need for endogenous resources):

*"The system has been used many times to inform affiliates instantly of major industrial disputes and call on them to give assistance. During a recent strike at Cathay Pacific airlines, cabin crew were stranded in airports all over the world. The ITF was able to contact affiliates in those countries and get immediate help. It has also used this system in Europe to inform European truckers about border blockades."* (Flint 1993).<sup>20</sup>

## **9. The shift from territorial segmentation to functional specialization**

For two reasons, most larger (e.g. nationwide or international) voluntary associations are formally segmented into territorial subunits with a regional or local jurisdiction:

*First of all*, many of them have been constituted historically by a merger of pre-existing lower-scale associations, which often insist on preserving their formal status and some

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.icem.org/campaigns/no\\_pay\\_cc/progress\\_report01.html](http://www.icem.org/campaigns/no_pay_cc/progress_report01.html)

<sup>19</sup> Bulletin of the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations, 3, Dec. 1993. "Computer Communications and the Labour Movement", <http://www.poptel.org.uk/ifwea/ifwwe03.html>

<sup>20</sup> Richard Flint (1993): Von der International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF). In: Bulletin of the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations, 3, Dec. 1993.

kind of autonomy after unification. And *secondly*, such segmental subunits become reinforced (and new artificial subunits of the same divisional kind may be constituted) because for various reasons, they promote and reinforce organizational integration. In particular, they facilitate all kinds of multilateral communication because members or representatives have to travel lesser distances for holding meetings, and because the organization may profit from spontaneous interpersonal relations and the motivations stemming from expressive, informal social interactions (particularly on the local level) (Clark/Wilson 1961).

Contrasting with other kinds of structural differentiations (based function, member status or ideological orientation), territorial segmentation has two significant consequences for the functioning of voluntary associations:

1) They remain highly dependent on their contexts, because cleavages permeating their societal environment (e. g. between urban and rural regions or between regional and ethnic cultures) tend to be mirrored within the association. For the same reason, the encompassing organization is unlikely to experience highly-profiled divisions and polarizations, because each subunit has to work out compromise positions for pure internal reasons.

2) The subunits themselves are hardly able to create specialized subunits and professionalize many functions, because each of them has to deal with the whole gamut of demands, problems and activities characteristic for the association as a whole.

Until the early 60ies, the sphere of voluntary associations was dominated by well established membership associations organized on local, state and national levels which were tightly integrated into the Web of societal institutions:

*“Classic American association-builders took it for granted that the best way to gain national influence, moral or political, was to knit together national, state, and local groups that met regularly and engaged in a degree of representative governance. Leaders who desired to speak on behalf of masses of Americans found it natural to proceed by recruiting self-renewing mass memberships and spreading a network of interactive groups. After the start-up phase, associational budgets usually depended heavily on membership dues and on sales of newsletters or supplies to members and local groups.*

*Supporters had to be continuously recruited through social networks and person-to-person contacts. And if leverage over government was desired, an association had to be able to influence legislators, citizens, and newspapers across many districts. For all of these reasons, classic civic entrepreneurs with national ambitions moved quickly to recruit activists and members in every state and across as many towns and cities as possible within each state.” (Skocpol 1999)*

Thus, most national organizations originated as unions of local associations and maintained their spatial segmentation afterwards as *the* predominating principle of representation.

These multilayer structures made it possible that rank and file members were at least participating on basic levels and could make their influence felt at least indirectly (through mechanisms of representation). Most importantly, cross-class recruitment meant that such inclusive associations had an integrative impact on society: partially neutralizing (instead of reinforcing) divisions between social strata.

By contrast, the movements originating since the later 60ies were more informal and dominated by specific strata predisposed for protest behavior: particularly college

students and university graduates (Skocpol 1999). In the following decades, there was a growing volatility of associations, most of which were no longer constituted by building up such complex multilayer structures from the local and regional level. Instead, many of them were immediately founded as national associations: recruiting their membership by top-down mechanisms (like direct mailings), or having no formal members at all (but only informal adherents and sympathizers, like political parties).

On the other hand, established conventional associations lost ground: they were increasingly bypassed in the political process, and their membership began to dwindle (e. g. the labor unions, the General Federation of Women's Clubs etc.).

*"No longer do civic entrepreneurs think of constructing vast federations and recruiting interactive citizen-members. When a new cause (or tactic) arises, activists envisage opening a national office and managing association-building as well as national projects from the center. Even a group aiming to speak for large numbers of Americans does not absolutely need members. And if mass adherents are recruited through the mail, why hold meetings? From a managerial point of view, interactions with groups of members may be downright inefficient. In the old-time membership federations, annual elections of leaders and a modicum of representative governance went hand in hand with membership dues and interactive meetings. But for the professional executives of today's advocacy organizations, direct mail members can be more appealing because, as Kenneth Godwin and Robert Cameron Mitchell explain, "they contribute without `meddling'" and "do not take part in leadership selection or policy discussions." (Skocpol 1999)*

As a consequence, associational endeavors and articulations become more and more dominated by the educated middle classes, while lower strata are excluded more dramatically than in all other historical eras of the United States.

*"Despite the multiplicity of voices raised within it, America's new civic universe is remarkably oligarchical. Because today's advocacy groups are staff-heavy and focused on lobbying, research, and media projects, they are managed from the top with few opportunities for member leverage from below. Even when they have hundreds of thousands of adherents, contemporary associations are heavily tilted toward upper-middle-class constituencies."*

*"Whether we are talking about memberless advocacy groups, advocacy groups with some chapters, mailing-list associations, or non-profit institutions, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the wealthiest and best-educated Americans are much more privileged in the new civic world than their (less numerous) counterparts were in the pre-1960s civic world of cross-class membership federations." (Skocpol 1999)*

The Internet is more likely to reinforce than to overturn this general trend, because online campaigning has the effect that influence is even more exclusively monopolized by self-recruited activists, while formalized influence by lesser active rank-and file members (exercised by voting or by mechanisms of formal representation) declines.

Certainly, the new computer media are unlikely to make such territorially-based subunits obsolete, because many of their functions cannot be substituted by online communications. In fact, they may sometimes even be reinforced, insofar as members connected by strong social ties may be more likely to use email contacts in addition to all their offline interactions.

But the new media are likely to facilitate the emergence of additional, cross-cutting solidarities and groupings based on homogeneity of personal status characteristics (age,

gender, educational etc.), on consensual goals or ideological outlooks or on a convergence in functional specialization and operational activities.

In fact, certain intrinsic characteristics make online communication particularly effective for the internal communication within highly homogeneous groups. Because only explicit verbal cues can be transmitted, online communication is only effective when it can build on a highly specific and highly stabilized background of common knowledge and social norms. For instance, even very short email exchanges among chemists or physicists can carry extremely complex information, because senders and receivers completely agree on the definitions of scientific problems, the connotations of scientific terms, and the methods of scientific procedures.

The more a collectivity has anchored its identity in highly objectified and depersonalized cultural patterns (text documents, emblems etc.), the better it can make use of the Internet for presenting its creeds and mission adequately to a highly heterogeneous global public, and for bringing other people to the point where they can easily decide whether they want to join the group or not.

This may explain why extremist groups like Neonazis or “White Suprematists” have been particularly successful in recruiting new members from their Websites (Buie 2000), because their group culture essentially consists of a mixture of conventional logos, shorthand slogans and highly simplified and excessively sharpened collective opinions and creeds.

For communication processes within and between organizations, this regularity has the following implications:

- 1) Online communication is difficult within small organizations, because roles are rather unspecialized and each member tends to have its own combination of tasks, knowledge and skills. The larger a firm, the more functions there are where several members do almost exactly the same thing and share a common class-specific or professional culture – so that online communication becomes viable.
- 2) Highly specialized organization members are more likely to find their most similar counterparts in other organizations. Thus, online communication may expand more in the interorganizational sphere, while in-house communication is still focusing on F2F interactions. As a result, online interaction may contribute to the fragmentation of (highly differentiated) organizations, because specialists of all kinds have more opportunities to cultivate their transorganizational professional relationships and solidarities, while their “local” orientation may decline.
- 3) Online communication is not well suited for integrating divisional (e. g. territorially segmented) organizations: because the heads of the different divisions or segments occupy highly polyvalent roles. Thus, mayors of cities, heads of local parishes or directors of regional insurance agencies may never maintain highly profitable networks of computer-supported interaction, because their range of functions and current problems is so broad that they are not able to establish highly efficient and sophisticated threads of communication (Goodman/Darr 1998).
- 4) In the union sector, there is an edge for occupational unions recruiting members which share a common vocational education and occupy similar jobs. By contrast, online communications in industrial unions may be more cumbersome various strata and job categories within branches maintain highly divergent knowledge bases, priorities and views.

By combining their membership in territorial subunits with a participation in such translocal groupings, individual members may gain a more complex set of intraorganizational roles, and associations may become more permeated with “cross cutting cleavages” which are known to moderate collective conflicts (Lipset 1960; Lipset/Rokkan 1967).

In general, such new affiliations are not likely to affect territorial subunits negatively, because online communications are so non-intrusive that they can easily be combined with any other social roles. Thus receiving and answering e-mail or SMS-messages is not preventing anybody from attending meetings or continuing contacts by Fax or phone. Given the widening number and range of intra-associational subunits, groupings and factions, it might be expected that the total volume of member involvement and participation will increase: because any member is more likely to find somewhere co-members coinciding with his own preferences and needs. In particular, members not consenting to mainstream ideas or policies will be more likely to find congenial partners – or even to collect enough adherents for forming a stable group or establishing a formal suborganizational unit.

In addition, this trend toward multidimensional affiliations and cleavages may give rise to more volatile or intraorganizational structures and policies which may be called “chaordic” (to use a term initiated by the founder of VISA- International: Dee Hock).<sup>21</sup> More specifically, associations may become shaped by fluidly changing alliances based alternately on territorial, ideological, ethnical or status-related affiliations. The leaders of the territorial subunits may well be most affected by such developments, because they have to share their influence on associational policies with new elites emerging from various online groupings and “virtual communities.”

Given the territorial segmentation of political power, many Cybercampaigns operate under the basic incongruity that while the channels used for mobilization and communication have a global reach, while the decision making centers which are addressed are usually power centers of nations (or other territorially systems like member states, provinces or cities).

In other words: while input maximization (in terms of money, petition signatures, solidarity actions etc.) calls for extensive transnational strategies, output optimization implies: focusing all the resources on territorially restricted activities and actors.

This incongruence is vividly illustrated by the tendency of Congressmen to treat all emails as “spams” when they don’t originate from voters of their own district, because from a rational point of view, it doesn’t pay out to be responsive to anonymous global publics which have no impact on the coming elections.

Consequently, there is a need for intermediary organizations which provide the information necessary to direct cybercampaign activities into the congruent territorial channels.

*“One way to do that is through the Juno Advocacy Network (JAN), which targets advocacy ads to its 6.1 million subscribers by geography, demographic profile and*

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<sup>21</sup> David Bollier: *Reinventing Democratic Culture in an Age of Electronic Networks.*  
<http://www.netaction.org/bollier/index.html>

*interest. The system automatically signs each e-mail generated with a subscriber's name and home address, and routes it to the correct member of Congress. Membership organizations, major corporations, labor unions, advocacy groups and grassroots consultants are now tapping this system for its built-in targeting capability. Furthermore, the response rate of JAN e-mail generating ads has run between 6.5 percent and 12.5 percent - light-years ahead of the old Web-based results.” (Stone 1999).*

Considering that still many political representatives belong to older age cohorts which have never become habitualized to regularized e-mail use, it is often highly advisable to send the message by fax or even by conventional mail.

## **10. The increasing impact of subjective individual motivations on organizational goals, activities and structures**

On a very general theoretical level, it might be hypothesized that the Internet increases the degree of correspondence (and covariation) between the individual and the social level: by lowering the transaction costs so heavily that individuals are much better able to find (or constitute) social collectivities exactly according to their current needs, values and goals, and by forcing collectivities to be highly responsive toward the heterogeneous (and constantly changing) individual motives, values and expectations (Bonchek 1995). This is exemplified by the “Civic Involvement Center” of American Online which allows all philanthropically minded users to sponsor exactly their most preferred cause: *“The Civic Involvement System on America Online offers an extensive Donation Center, where well over three million prospective donors may research and identify organizations by type or location (for example, a user could search for non-profits involved with “children” in “California”). Once identified, the user may access a profile of each organization that meets his or her criteria. Each profile includes not only a “wish list” of things other than money that an organization needs, but also instructions on how to make a dollar donation. Most individuals send a pledge of a donation by e-mail, including their credit-card information and the amount pledged.” (Clark 1995)*

This of course implies that the flow of donations an organization receives is no longer determined by its public reputation, trust or other highly generalized (and therefore: stabilizing) factors. Instead, the success of its fundraising actions will depend more on volatile influences: e. g. whether it can show convincing successes or whether follows a “fashionable” cause.

By reducing the weight of mediating (e. g. organizational or ideological) factors, the Internet is highly functional for any group, movement or association to exploit subjective individual motivations without frictions and distortions for their own needs.

Consequently, any groups may make use directly from the fact that many Net users are willing to spend money because they coincide with their goals; others may find that widespread feelings of belongingness may be exploited for increasing group cohesion and enacting intensive internal communication; others are able to transform widespread needs for direct participation into very high turnouts of votes; and finally, highly reputable and trusted leaders find better ways to use their leadership capacities for widespread contacts and effective persuasion.

By providing a very low threshold access to social interaction and organizational participation, the Internet facilitates the direct, non-mediated transformation of individual

attitudes into social actions, so that collective behavior can be better kept in pace and in accordance with the demands of individuals and the goals of very small-scale (and widely dispersed) microsocial groups.

Thus, whenever a movement association succeeds in raising funds, gaining additional members or mobilizing any kind of support by its online activities, it can be certain that this support is a very authentic expression of current individual attitudes, feelings and thoughts.

In comparison to conventional methods of mobilization, far less physical or technical obstacles are present to prevent sympathizers from expressing actively their views and from transforming their subjective disposition into social participation; and as online users are typically alone in their apartment, they are very likely to be motivated predominantly by their private views – not by any “bandwagon-effects” typical for physically assembled groups.

In addition, the Internet allows a much better exploitation of microsocial group motivations, because the same medium which connects participants to worldwide movements is also functional for communicating with near partners and friends (Myers 1992).

**Generally then, we may expect that with the rise of the Internet, associational activities and developments of all kinds become more tightly determined by variables on the individual and the microsocial levels, while the impact of mesosocial structures (organizations and institutions) declines.**

**For voluntary associations, this has the consequence that internal communication increasingly influenced by self-recruited individual activists and by highly cohesive and ambitious informal groups.**

Whenever individuals are participating in assemblies (like meetings, congresses or demonstrations), they are subjected to various social pressures which have an independent impact on their thinking and behavior. Thus, they become unwillingly exposed to verbal communications which can change their attitudes, and bandwagon or “social facilitation” effects may motivate them to participate in collective mob actions rather inconsistent with their subjective values and beliefs.

By contrast, Internet users are typically sitting alone in front of their computer, so that their behavior is more exclusively guided by subjective (psychological) factors. For example, the decision to spend money for a given campaign is likely to be a rather direct outflow of an affirmative attitude toward this specific movement, its concrete aims and operative actions, because no “models” for imitation are around and no physically present solicitor will look dissatisfied when I’m not meeting his expectations.

In other words: online activities are primarily determined by determinants *exogenous* to the online situation itself: e. g. by characteristics of the user and by all (offline and online) factors which have an impact on his or her current subjective preferences, moods, feelings and thoughts.

Thus, whenever individuals are emotionally highly motivated to participate in a collectivity, they will visit its Webpage and participate in its discussion forums even if the page is of low technical quality and the group has not spent any advertisement money for attracting visitors.

And vice versa: when an individual is not interested in the group, it will not pay attention to its site even if the group has made huge efforts for mobilizing attention.<sup>22</sup>

Empirical studies show that whenever individuals have already established rather strong ties, they will readily assimilate the new electronic media, giving them a complementary (not substitutive) function to all the other (already established) media of communication. Consequently, their ties may even become more intensive, and they may deviate ever more from weak-ties members who are more likely to cling to one single medium, or even: to discontinue their ties altogether as soon as their single medium (e. g. regular face-to-face gathers) is no longer available.

Whenever work or friendship ties are strong, however, communicators exhibit a greater frequency of communication, maintain more and different kinds of relations, and more different media tend to be used in combination:

*"It is theorized that where weak ties depend on only one medium, they are likely to be highly susceptible to dissolution following changes in that medium. On the other hand, strong ties will be more robust under conditions of change since their connection rests on multiple relations maintained via multiple media. Thus, the linear notion of tie strength gives rise to non-linear impacts: weak tie networks will dissolve and reform when the medium they use to sustain communication is changed; strong tie networks will persist, sustained through other media until the new medium is incorporated into their repertoire."* (Haythornthwaite 1999)

This hypothesis has applications on three levels:

*First*, it implies that electronic media engender higher divergences between different voluntary associations: by increasing the cohesion of groupings already highly integrated; while the integration of low-tie collectivities stagnates or even declines.

Given the outspoken "pull" character of computer media, it is evident that large advantages accrue to collectivities with already highly mobilized members. They gain most by the fact that unlimited flows of communications can be maintained almost without costs when the necessary technical equipment (Web servers, modems, etc.) has been installed.

This is exemplified by many religious groups and denominations which can rely on tightly knit group relationships and intensive feelings of belongingness among their members:

*"The Internet has proved to be an extremely effective tool for advocacy organizations that already have a strong grassroots following. The Christian Coalition, a conservative religious organization in Chesapeake, Va., is one such operation. The organization has used e-mail and other online-communications tools to improve the way it distributes information to its network of activists spread throughout thousands of churches across the country."*<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the new Net technologies increase the degree to which the communicative potential of groups is conditioned by the spontaneous motivations and involvements of its

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<sup>22</sup> See for instance. Niels Werber: *Ungeahnte Einigkeit. Die Rolle des Internet in der Parteipolitik.*  
<http://www.heise.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/te/1446/1.html>

<sup>23</sup> Paul Demko: *Acting up On Line.* In: *The Chronicle of Philanthropy.*  
<http://philanthropy.com/articles/dir/v10.dir/il2.dir/12advocacy.htm>

individual members, while the significance of money and organizational resources (which are a prerequisite for successful mass media communication) declines.

This explains why some of the first labor unions using net communication have been *local* associations with a membership very well integrated on the level of face to face interactions. Thus the “American Federation of Musicians in new York” was the first union in the United States to establish a Bulletin News Service (in 1986).<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, there is an edge for associations with highly reputable or charismatic leaders because their membership is highly disposed to exploit the net’s capacity for non-mediated leader-follower interactions. While the Internet may not have the potential for creating or intensifying leadership authority or personal charisma, it is highly functional for leaders already in possession of high personal authority and public appeal, because it allows them to contact an indefinite number of sympathizers without costs, delays and personal efforts.

In the past, charismatic leaders could realize only part of their influence because the number of people they could contact directly was limited for technical and economic reasons. For reaching wider masses, they had to rely therefore on middlemen who were not able and willing to transport leadership authority undistorted to all the followers. While radio and TV increased the reach of personal authority, Email and WWW open even more extended opportunities for leaders to maintain direct contact to very many followers even in an interactive way (Bonchek 1995). Wherever there is a “true follower” eager to hear, what his leader has to say on any topic, current developments or recent events, he can consult the respective Webpages or newsletter to receive authentic communication, **not** selected, edited and distorted by any intermediary agencies or functionaries.

*Secondly*, the “pull” character of online relationship implies that its use and impact can be extremely variable over time: being extremely high in phases of acute mobilization and sinking back to very low levels during “normal”, uneventful times. This explains why unions have been very successful in propagating “Daily Online News” during strike periods, while such publications have almost never survived the end of the strike.<sup>25</sup>

*Third*, it follows that within most associations, wider gaps between highly committed “activists” and more passive member categories will arise: because the activists will make ready use of the new technologies to increase their cohesion as well as to intensify their influence on central decision making procedures. We may even see the enhancement (not the decline, as suggested in (7) of local subgroups within associations, because members of local sections are most likely to maintain those intimate ties which profit most from additional online media. While the Internet theoretically frees community building from all obstacles of geographical distance, most online communities are still based on proximity in space. Thus, national or regional groupings are still among the best examples of functioning multilateral online interaction (like Zamir in ex-Yugoslavia) (Stubbs 1998).

For the same reasons, online media can strengthen the position of highly involved and strongly participating members *within* associations. In fact, the gap between core activist groups and passive fringe members may increase because the former use the Net for

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<sup>24</sup> Eric Lee (1995): Labour and the Internet. In: Internet Business Journal, (<http://www.solinet.org/LEE/ibj.html>)

<sup>25</sup> see Eric Lee: The Labour Movement and the Internet. Chapter 4 (selection), <http://www.solinet.org/LEE/labour34.html>

intensifying their already well established communications, while the latter may not change their behavior at all. Thus, whenever online discussion forums are established, they are likely to become monopolized by rather few activists: like in the case of the IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stager Employees) in 1994, where 50% of the 350 monthly BBS messages were originating from only 12 members.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, the more an association loads up salient information materials, the wider will be the knowledge gap between the more active members who are motivated and skilled to inform themselves about it, and the more passive members who ignore it all.

Thus, when unions publish the full text of the contracts they have negotiated with employees, some activists will make use these new chances to read these hitherto rather inaccessible documents in order to increase their capacity to stand up for their own rights – even in cases and aspects where official union leadership doesn't provide support. By doing this, they will increase their “informational distance” to the other rank-and-file members who continue to be uninformed (or to be satisfied with indirect, highly digested information officially provided by union PR-officials).

They resemble somewhat the early protestants who got independent from institutional religion because they decided to read the bible on their own (while their less active co-members are still clinging to the “official church”

More and more, such cliques may usurp leadership by determine the agenda setting and by deliberating on decisions before they are discussed in formal broader assemblies. Thus, general rank-and-file members participating in general assemblies may more often find that such meetings are strongly dominated by activist groups who have used online communication for hammering out consensual opinions, strategies and procedures long before the meeting has started. More and more, the leaders of associations are likely to become highly involved in such “semi-elitist” communications. In fact, they may easily be convinced that the Email they get from activists is expressing “general member opinion” – disregarding the basic fact that these messages stem from very tiny activist groups (typically younger males with higher education), while the “average members” may still not be hooked up (or not be motivated to make use of the new medium for upward communication).

Thus, a general effect of the Internet may be that factual influence within organized collectivities covaries more tightly with the degree of personal activity and participation, while the significance of “positional power” (based on official roles) and of “reputational power” (stemming from popularity or prestige) declines.

Consequently, the question how online communication is related to intra-associational democracy has to find a two-edged answer. On the one hand, democracy is enhanced insofar as any self-selected activists can use the Net to make themselves heard: activists who are not part of central informal elite networks and not incumbents of any formal roles. On the other hand, these self-recruited “online oligarchies” may well increase their influence at the cost of more peripheral members (e.g. by maintaining continuous Email contact with associational leaders).

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<sup>26</sup> Allen Schaaf (1996): Unions, the Rank and File, and the Internet. In: CMC Magazine, Nov. 1996, <http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1996/nov/schaaf.html>

On the one hand, this implies a *decentralization* of power: because beside elite members, and self-recruited activists can take part and make a difference, when they are sufficiently active and skilled. Participation in this intermediary sphere is highly accessible because (1) each group remains very open for any participants and (2) new groups can form any time without much cost or organizational efforts (Liff 1998).

On the other hand, this same development can have effects of *centralization*: because these intermediary groupings function like filters who shield decision making elites against the influence of even lower population segments (e. g. normal citizens or rank-and-file union members who have hitherto based their participation on their formal participation in votes and elections). Oligarchy is fostered particularly because even tiny groups can become very effective when they are highly organized and highly qualified in influencing the right people and mobilizing the right adherents at the right time. (Liff 1998).

On the individual level, the highest gain of influence may accrue to members with unusually high verbal skills which are not likely to be available to people with low education.

This effect is stemming from the fact that communication is more focused on the verbal level, because no nonverbal cues can be transmitted:

*“Certainly, Email use demands relatively high levels of linguistic, textual and word processing competencies, even though its standards of typographical exactitude are, certainly, less than those of much print published communication. In the absence of face-to-face cues for stereotyping, participants in some email discussion groups may, indeed, overcompensate in their disapproval of misspellings, clumsy formatting, or messages which go wrong in some way because the user has not (yet) grasped the fine detail of the software program. Educational capital converted into what might be termed 'computer cultural capital' is, therefore, no less exclusionary than other forms of cultural capital.”* (Stubbs 1998)

In short: the Internet enlarges the opportunities for cultural elites to exercise leadership functions based on supreme capacities for verbal articulation, persuasive argumentations, for building extensive interactional networks or for aggregating different view-point to widely appealing synthesized positions.

To summarize, it may be concluded that the Internet is boosting the influence of *upper-middle status levels* by causing a major surge of collective (or political) participation on middle levels of organizations, associations and society as a whole:

- **below** the exclusive circles of formal and informal elites, professional politicians and functionaries.
- **above** the level of lowly involved general populations (citizens who participate only in voting or through formal membership in associations).

This rather large intermediate sphere is now filled with many rather specific and small activist groups which use the Net for better communication, coordination and for highly efficient campaigning. Thus, the Internet seems to give rise to "polyarchic" collectivities influenced by a rather broad range of elitist and semi-elitist circles.

## 11. New Tools for Bottom-Up Communication and Grassroots Campaigning

Since the 70ies, the dominant paradigm in social movement theory was the “resource mobilization approach” which stressed the role of mesosocial organizational actors, large scale societal mobilization processes initiated by centralized actors (“social entrepreneurship”, macrosocial interorganizational networks (“social movement industries”) and above all: the very tight interdependencies between informal movements and formalized institutional structures (e. g, Zald/McCarthy 1987; Jenkins 1983; Myers 1998).

As several researchers began to notice at the end of the 80ies, such “Weberian” views emphasizing the primacy of institutional levels and the inevitability of centralization implied the neglect of equally salient factors like subjective deprivations, microsocial interaction networks and more horizontal modes of “collective behavior” (e. g. Myers 1998). As a consequence, older paradigms focusing on the level of grassroots interactions and horizontal group processes have been revitalized (see Melucci 1989; Taylor/Whittier 1992).

The Internet promotes the emergence of large-scale collectivities from the “grassroots level” because it enriches the arsenal of mobilization mechanisms by some extremely decentralized and informal procedures which can start and expand easily outside any framework of formal organization:

*“The most informal method involves the personal use of electronic mail. Activists will send items of relevance to friends, colleagues, and fellow activists, who in turn may be spurred into action by the message. Each person who receives the message has the option to forward it to her or his acquaintances. The result is an effective information network powered by electronic mail forwarding. Using this method, activists can relay messages to thousands of like-minded computer users in a very short time.” (Myers 1998)*

In the past, a major incentive for centralization stemmed from the communicative deficiencies of decentralized interaction networks. Typically, every transmission from one person to the next involved a significant risk of distortion and/or misunderstanding, so that after many transmission steps, information becomes mere “rumors” only distantly similar to the original messages (Turner and Killian 1972). Thus, whenever an individual A wanted to transmit a message precisely to many other people, it had no alternative than to submit it to a sender S, which then broadcasted it by technical means (letters, Faxes, printed journals, radio or TV etc.) to a large number of receivers. Of course, this intermediation implied that the broadcasting agency gained a certain control over what shall be broadcasted to whom in which form at what point of time.

With the Internet, this incentive to centralize communicative processes has vanished, because most complex messages can be transmitted within complex horizontal networks without any loss of information.

*“One important asset the computer network has is the accurate replication of information to the thousands of nodes it touches. Because of forwarding capabilities, original messages can travel through many network nodes without the slightest distortion. The result is widespread dissemination without the misinformation that typically results from pass-along methods of information distribution. Given social movements' tendencies to rely on informal networks to distribute information about the grievances and activities of the movement, the computer network marks a substantial advance in communication procedures.” (Myers 1998)*

As a consequence, centralized organizational services are less needed for securing widespread accurate communication (e. g. distributing addresses of phone numbers of participants or communicating the precise time and place of collective actions).

Consequently, less money has to be spent for professional communicators (employed in the central offices), because diffusion processes can easily be distributed to a multitude of members acting as unpaid volunteers (each forwarding received messages to his/her own friends).

In the Balkan wars, for example, such networks had the function of providing new solutions by “bottom-up” communication when conventional top-down communication failed:

*“Perhaps more importantly, zamir became the most visible part of an experimental social movement, articulating a kind of 'globalization from below' (Deacon et al, 1994; Turmir, 1998), seeking grassroots civil solutions to a conflict in which, patently, top down political solutions were thin on the ground and likely to prove disappointing.” (Stubbs 1998)*

Even at that early time of the Internet, when hardware facilities were still relatively expensive, the whole technical infrastructure was easily provided by non-governmental Western sources (e. g. Western Peace movements and the George Soros’s Open society Fund), so that the “movement” never became dependent on any governmental support (Stubbs 1998).

Similarly, the Internet is a ready tool for already well established “New Social Movements”, which since their inception (in the 60ies and 70ies) have stressed decentralized networking instead of centralized leadership guidance and ideological indoctrination.

This is particularly true for *ecologist movements* because they operate under conditions which make it necessary to rely on very decentralized organizational structures. First of all, they typically address environmental problems occurring in very different geographical locations; secondly, they have to focus on a manifold of decision makers, institutions and agencies (on global and regional as well as on national and local levels); and thirdly, they have to collect and distribute a wide variety of information stemming from many different sources (e. g. research institutions or local administrative agencies).

As articulated in the following hypothetical example, using the Internet is indispensable for combining decentralized fact-gathering and mobilization with speedy diffusion and knowledge, consensus building and effective transnational action:

*“In this office at Web World in Seattle, Roger Adams is working on the United Nation Environment Program’s online action guide for community organizations. He e-mails drafts to the working groups, and is told that the guide needs more material on sustainable agriculture. Adams writes a quick query on his Macintosh and "uplinks" it into a "listserv," which automatically sends it on to 2,000 environmentalists around the world. He goes back to working on his document, with the e-mail program working in the background. Within an hour, a listserv subscriber in South Africa has sent him the material he needs. Adams copies the material into his document, attributes it, and completes a new draft, which he immediately e-mails back to the working group.” (Motavalli 1996)*

Similar advantages accrue to the latest antiglobalist and anticorporatist movements which are even more decentralized and informal than any “New Social Movements” which have appeared since the late sixties.

This is vividly illustrated by the recent antiglobalization protests (e.g. at the WTO Conference in Seattle 1999 and the World bank meeting in Prag 2000) were processes of “spontaneous clustering” have been enacted for building up huge demonstrations within very short time:

*“One of the more impressive innovations has been the method of organizing, arranging, and directing the operational and administrative activities associated with the demonstrations—accomplished effectively without the obvious influence of central authority, command, or control. In many ways, the system is very similar to that advocated by anarchists of the libertarian socialist philosophy. Activities begin with like-minded individuals who gather in affinity groups across the country, plan their roles, and travel to the site of the demonstration.*

*Once at the site, they join with other like-minded affinity groups to form clusters and to select a spokesperson who attends the daily spokescouncil. At the latter, discussions are held and information passed concerning operational and administrative activities—arrangements for accommodation, feeding, legal advice, types of actions to be implemented.” (CSIS 2000)*

In addition, the cell phones have amplified the capacities to revise action strategies so quickly that police agencies are not able to plan their own actions because they cannot predict what is happening where and when.

*“Cellphones constitute a basic means of communication and control, allowing protest organizers to employ the concepts of mobility and reserves and to move groups from place to place as needed. The mobility of demonstrators makes it difficult for law enforcement and security personnel to attempt to offset their opponents through the presence of overwhelming numbers. It is now necessary for security to be equally mobile, capable of readily deploying reserves, monitoring the communications of protesters, and, whenever possible, anticipating the intentions of the demonstrators. In some cases, the extremist elements, e.g., Black Bloc anarchists, have used the ranks of moderate protesters as shields to prevent law enforcement personnel from viewing violent activities and from getting into position to stop the damage” (CSIS 2000).*

Lacking clear leadership as well as clearly defined stock of followers, they consist of a multitude of divergent groupings which coordinate their actions spontaneously for specific time periods, without losing their structural autonomy and without converging in their ideological views and specific strategic goals.

Evidently, their offline organization is somewhat isomorphic to their loose online linkages on the Web:

*“.....these campaigns have not coalesced into a single movement. Rather, they are intricately and tightly linked to one another, much as ‘hotlinks’ connect their websites on the Internet.*

*This analogy is more than coincidental and is in fact key to understanding the changing nature of political organizing.*

*Although many have observed that the recent mass protests would have been impossible without the Internet, what has been overlooked is how the communication technology that facilitates these campaigns is shaping the movement in its own image.*

*What emerged on the streets of Seattle and Washington was an activist model that mirrors the organic, decentralized, interlinked pathways of the Internet--the Internet come to life." (Klein 2000)*

While stable oligarchic elites are inexistent, guidance is merely exerted by “geek adhocracies”: self-recruited computer-savvy specialists skilled in networking the different groups (Klein 2000).

Obviously, Email is highly functional for initiating “flash campaigns” where salient information is spread horizontally: with each receiver forwarding it to his own friends and acquaintances: so that no need for centralized diffusion agencies is created. Most of these diffusion processes are “redundant” in the sense that many individuals will receive identical messages from two or more different sources. Thus, millions of people can be alerted and mobilized reliably within very short time

In fact, each individual member (or subgroup) can temporarily assume the role of a centralized leadership role by initiating such a campaign: without being able to exert outstanding influence roles in to subsequent operational stages.

This is in sharp contradiction to conventional bureaucratic centers which have a far more generalized and stable influence role: from initiating campaigns to supervising their operational proceedings until sealing the final negotiations.

Given their extremely decentralized structure, computer networks facilitate highly decentralized forms of campaigning based on parallel activities of many independent individuals or groups. For instance, thousands of net users may be induced to sign petitions, to send identical protest letters to specific decision makers, to organize simultaneous demonstrations in many different cities, or to order packages of flyers or bumper stickers for distributing them in their respective neighborhood.

Such decentralized mass actions can profit from the fact that protest actions supported by a broad variety of independent participants may generate more legitimacy than an action supported by a few organizations – even if these latter represent a much larger number of individuals.

Thus, when a political representative receives 1000 letters from as many voters, he may become quite responsive because he has reasons to believe that these 1000 constitute a rather representative sample of his whole constituency – so that he has to fear heavy losses in the next elections when he fails to react. On the other hand, when he gets a similar request from a large association pretending to speak for its 100 000 members, he may take this as the articulation of a rather limited segment of the voting population (e. g. only unionized workers) – or even as an elitist articulation representing only the opinion of the association’s leadership, not as the attitude of their average silent members.

Whenever the members of a specific association engage in such grassroots actions, the leadership of the association may find its authority undermined, because its claim “to know best what the members really want” can be challenged by the outcome of such non-mediated campaigns.

In fact, highly institutionalized systems of corporatist political decision making may become weakened because politicians become more immersed in non-institutional communications (e.g. direct Emails from citizens), while the capacity of formal associational elites to represent their membership declines.

Consequently, it has to be expected that the Internet is most positively evaluated by various “secondary elites” hitherto not represented in established formal deliberation and

decision making bodies, while the formal elites are more reserved because their traditional capacity to monopolize communication processes is undermined.<sup>27</sup>

Given its decentralized anarchic structure, the Internet has a special affinity to very archaic groups not affected by any principles of bureaucratic organization. For instance, various collectivities dedicated to *paganism* have profited from the new media, because these groups found a new way of highly informal, erratic, leaderless communication. As the adherents are not only highly dispersed geographically, but very much isolated because they cannot communicate with kin, friends and neighbors about their strange beliefs, they find the Internet particularly useful in order to reinforce their own creeds as well as to foster the collective identity of their group.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, pagan net users find MUDs and other word-based virtual settings very congenial, because their own creeds are built on the premise that **words** have a strong constitutive impact on the Real World:

*“Computer spaces [like the created worlds in MUDs and chat] lend themselves to the same feeling of being 'here' and 'not here.' It's almost a return to the earliest iterations of religion itself, where the Word took on extraordinary power.”<sup>29</sup>*

In the future, we may have to live with the contingency that the groups profiting most from the new media are those which are defiant against formal organizations and centralized societal institutions. The new technology offers them the opportunity to creating and solidify informal networks, and to maintain encompassing and regularized internal communication without any need to establish administrative structure, full-time roles or organizational leadership, and without becoming dependent on subsidies from governmental or other institutional actors. In the US, for example, online communication is extensively used by the highly dispersed and informal militia groups on the far right, which preserve old American ideals of individual self-reliance and fight against the increasing power of governmental agencies and international organizations. In the past, such groups had to remain very marginal because by defying established forms of social organization, they were doomed to cling to highly atavistic forms of communication, so that their degree of internal coordination and their capacities for collective action remained rather weak.

Today, they can use computer Nets for communicating on a daily (or even hourly) basis: so that collective activities can be easily coordinated and technical/tactical information can be readily exchanged.

*“In the four mailing lists that I looked at there were some common members but hundreds of different people participated in just these few groups. Included in many of the messages were practical, real life, actions that could be done to further the cause. This part of the Internet proved most useful when communicating directly with other members. People contacted each other on a daily basis with newspaper articles, news stories and in some cases, just plain rumor. The point however is that this was a quick way of getting an article published in Seattle out to everyone in the community nation wide. After looking at all of the data collected by email, I saw that this was the tip of the iceberg of information out there for militia members and any other concerned citizen. Without such email*

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<sup>27</sup> The possibility of “direct democracy”, enabled by the new media, is feared as a challenge to “representative democracy” especially by the CDU/CSU and the FDP, whereas the Greens and the PDS (as well as parts of the SPD) tend to recognize additional channels of influence for their own ends in the new media (T. Armstroff, S. Peisker, S.K.Schmudlach: *Nutzung der Neuen Medien zur Öffentlichkeitsarbeit von Parteien in der BRD*). <http://selab24.informatik.uni-bremen.de/Lehre/politik/>

<sup>28</sup> Conjuring communities. In: *The Village Voice*. Vol. 43, Npo. 34; pp. 31ff.

<sup>29</sup> dito.

*technology it would be extremely difficult to produce the same volume of instant nation wide communication.” (Ward 1998)*

On a most general level, it may be said that the Internet gives rise to new forms of social organization which are better able to combine the following conflictive functional capacities:

- 1) high levels of individual autonomy and individual participation
- 2) widespread and volatile membership
- 3) effective coordination and precisely focused collective actions
- 4) high structural flexibility: due to lack of rigid of bureaucratic organization:
- 5) low external controllability: because there are no co-optable (and corruptible) leaders.

By means of decentralized horizontal online communications, networks may rival “hierarchies” and “markets” as a third major structural form constituting modern human societies.

Because of their intransparent informal organization, their capacities for collective actions have hitherto been mainly seen in negative terms: e. g. by their potentials to unleash “transnational social Netwars” (Powell 1990). As decentralized actors, networks are typically not disposed to “seize power” (like parties having bureaucratic structures and authoritarian leadership akin to governments), but to mobilize widespread pressure in order to have an impact on existing governmental (or international) authorities:

*“These analyses ...have also recognized how the content of these rhizomatic or networking forms of social mobilization has differed from traditional Leninist notions of revolution. Instead of a dedication to the seizure of power, the Zapatista rebellion, including its international dimensions, has involved a mobilization with the essentially political objectives of 1) pulling together grassroots movements against the current political and economic order in Mexico and the world and of 2) facilitating the elaboration and circulation of alternative approaches to social organization.” (Clever 1999)*

Such grassroots movements are not even capable (and willing) to participate in those formal cooperative structures with which the World Bank, the WTO or the OECD try to “co-opt” significant outside actors into their bureaucratic structures. In fact, all these big organizations show a tendency to cooperate only with established NGOs which are isomorphic to them in their degree of formalization, stability and internal centralization; and the try to maintain and propagate a narrow concept of “civil society” including only such institutionalized collective actors (Clever 1999).

As a consequence, established institutional actors may be more ready to react rather repressively (or in a helplessly defensive manner), because they cannot play their usual game within a pluralist system of “countervailing powers”. Even when these informal opponents follow no radical goals, they may still appear frightening because of their fluid decentralized structure.

These shortcomings in internal cohesion and external action capacities have to be weighed against the advantages accruing to the individual members who get a feeling of personal empowerment and rich opportunities for experiences and self-expression.

For the striking Liverpool dockers in 1997, Internet activities have not turned out decisive for their struggle with employers and the government, but highly crucial in an other, more “expressive” dimension: by offering them the new opportunities for experiencing solidarity, for building up new qualifications and for articulating their own values and views:

*“This computer-aided and internationalist effort, moreover, seems to have had a dramatic emancipatory effect on the dockers themselves. Instead of using the considerable individual redundancy payments many (not all) received themselves individually, they were trying, in collaboration with friends at Liverpool's technical university, to set up a worker self-managed enterprise to 1) train themselves and others in the new technology! 2) themselves produce cultural goods!*

*The first of these implies a positive labour response to the conditions of a globalised networked capitalism. The second means ‘capitalising’ on 1) Liverpool's rich local popular cultural tradition, 2) following up on their own experiment in producing a music CD-Rom, with the help of their many friends in the rock business!” (Waterman 1999)*

On the level of scientific methodology, all concepts relating to fixed physical objects are no longer adequate to describe such volatile collectivities: neither the concept of “system” nor the concept of “organization” (both originating from neatly circumscribed structures like biological organisms).

Instead, metaphors have to be sought in the realm of fluids like water:

*“As a metaphor for thinking about the ceaseless movement that forms the political life and historical trajectory of those resisting and sometimes escaping the institutions of capitalism, I have come to prefer that of water, of the hydrosphere, especially of oceans with their ever restless currents and eddies, now moving faster, now slower, now warmer, now colder, now deeper, now on the surface. At some points water does freeze, crystallizing into rigidity, but mostly it melts again, undoing one molecular form to return to a process of dynamic self-organizing that refuses crystallization yet whose directions and power can be observed and tracked. Thus too with “civil society.” It is fluid, changing constantly and only momentarily forming those solidified moments we call “organizations.” Such moments are constantly eroded by the shifting currents surrounding them so that they are repeatedly melted back into the flow itself.” (Cleaver 1999)*

To deal with such entities is a source of frustration not only to politicians, managers and other representatives of the world of established formal organizations, but also for social scientists looking for neatly differentiated “systems” with rather stable, precisely defined structures, rules and activity patterns.

## **12. The Rising Significance of “Interactional” Systemic Integration**

As all formally organized social systems, voluntary associations are integrated on three complementary (and partially substitutive) levels:

Typically, interactional relationships are highly salient at the early stages of system formation where frequent meetings are necessary in order to negotiate interests and reach consensus about basic values, goals, norms and procedures (Marcus 1966). When time goes on, however, these social relationships usually give rise to more *internalized* cohesive forces (e. g. subjective identifications) on the one hand and more *externalized* devices of integration (formalized charters, statutes and membership duties) on the other.

<b>Identificational level</b>	<b>Interactional level</b>	<b>Organizational level</b>
Subjective commitments of individual members to the collectivity: to its values, goals, norms or activities.	Horizontal processes of interaction and communication between members;	Bureaucratic and professional roles  Formal statutes and rules
Feelings of loyalty, identification and belongingness to the group as a community;	Vertical communications between members and leadership;	Formal procedures of entrance and dismissal  Official media of communication
Motivational dispositions for doing work, fulfilling duties, taking orders, assume responsibilities etc.	Exchange networks and cooperative group structures  Participation in group gatherings, assemblies, festivals, congresses, workshops etc.	Official symbols and emblems constituting the “corporate identity” (e. g. buildings, uniforms, letter heads).

In the past, most established associations had to rely primarily on identificational and/or organizational levels because interaction was difficult (or highly expensive) for physical and technical reasons. In particular, associations with widely dispersed membership had no alternative than to stabilize their identity on the basis of elaborated formal structures on the one hand and intensive subjective motivations on the other (e.g. religious collectivities).

Only on the local level, frequent face-to-face meetings provided a means to realize a predominantly interactional form of integration.

With the advent of new computer media, all social collectivities gain additional capacities to rely on social interaction as a major medium of system integration, because electronic media provide ample opportunities for cheap, widespread and continuous interaction not subjected to any restrictions of time and space.

The new antiglobalist movements illustrate the increased capacity of modern collectivities to base their identity and cohesion almost completely on current processes of interactional communication: so that they have less need for formalized rules, physical buildings, collective traditions or other non-interactional anchors of systemic stabilization.

*“...rather than build elaborate national or international bureaucracies, temporary structures were thrown up instead: Empty buildings were turned into ‘convergence centers’, and independent media producers assembled impromptu activist news centers. The ad hoc coalitions behind these demonstrations frequently named themselves after the date of the planned event: J18, N30, A16 and now, for the IMF meeting in Prague on September 26, S26. When these events are over, they leave virtually no trace behind, save for an archived website.” (Klein 2000)*

As a consequence, the already existing universe of about 30 000 formally constituted nongovernmental organizations has now been complemented by an incalculable number of informal “affinity groups” which have immensely broadened the range of articulated perspectives, issues and problems as well as the spectrum tactical procedures and the manifold of proposed alternative solutions (Klein 2000).

In the past, traditional labor organizations had certain role in facilitating and catalyzing online communications, because they were the first to possess the necessary resources and to exchange the knowledge on formal conferences. Thus, the famous “laboutTel” conferences

were organized within the framework of the British Trade Union System – and they were accordingly criticized of neglecting more peripheral and informal parts of newly emerging international movement (Waterman 1999).

But in the longer run, these established organizations are typically unable to steer online communications according to their preferences and to shape them in accordance with overall policy considerations.

Within the labor union sector, this new trend is currently most clearly seen on the transnational level where organizational development has been traditionally quite weak. In fact, the Internet makes seem to make it even more unlikely that labor reacts to the growing multinationalism of enterprises and employer’s associations with an isomorphic establishment of highly unified bureaucratized international union organizations. To the contrary, the focus of labor campaigns shifts to a galaxy of highly informal network activities: like the latest campaigns against the World Bank and the WTO. Instead of building up countervailing power in order to meet the corporations on the same level of organization, they prefer the “flea strategy” : harassing the big enterprises like spiders spinning a web around a big prey of like insects which are irritating elephants or lions. (Klein 2000).

By choosing such decentralized tactics, they gain much defensive resilience because they cannot be incapacitated or destroyed, but on the other hand, they lose offensive potentials because they lack the ability to build far-reaching consensus, to produce binding decisions, to secure long-term commitments and to focus their resources on single highly salient targets.

*“One of the great strengths of this model of laissez-faire organizing is that it has proven extraordinarily difficult to control, largely because it is so different from the organizing principles of the institutions and corporations it targets. It responds to corporate concentration with a maze of fragmentation, to globalization with its own kind of localization, to power consolidation with radical power dispersal.*

*“There is no question that the communication culture that reigns on the Net is better at speed and volume than at synthesis. It is capable of getting tens of thousands of people to meet on the same street corner, placards in hand, but is far less adept at helping those same people to agree on what they are really asking for before they get to the barricades-or after they leave.” (Klein 2000).*

This shift from structural to interactional means of collective integration has many far-reaching consequences for associational structures and activities:

*First of all*, it means that Email functions as a new *basic medium* for voluntary associations by allowing to establish among members extremely extensive networks of weak ties (Haythornthwaite 1999). Thus, interactional integration can be realized in more extensive social groupings: in collectivities unable to assemble all their members on congresses or other F2F occasions. In addition, the traditional gap between horizontally interacting delegates (or board members) and non-interacting “normal members” could

diminish (or vanish altogether), because all members now have access to horizontal social interaction

*Secondly*, it is to be expected that interactive processes are no longer restricted to specific occasions and periods of time (e. g. meetings, congresses etc.); but go on continuously day and night, weekdays and Sundays, during the whole year. Consequently, even members of larger collectivities may for the first time have the experience of being participants in a never-ending field of interaction, where they have access to all other members and to various sub-collectivities all the time.

*Third*, open communication can easily expand to any topic or discussion, disregarding conventional norms of excluding the public by preserving specific questions to representative bodies, specialized commissions or executive boards. Thus, it may no longer be possible to keep clear distinctions between “legislative” and “executive” levels of collective action, because even subordinate tactical decisions may easily be influenced by any informal groups.

*Fourth*, we may expect that the crucial question “who belongs to us” is no longer answered primarily in terms of formal criteria of membership, but increasingly in terms of actual communicative participation. Thus, all associations may become more ready to include any “outsiders” not formally signed up as members, whenever such individuals assume an active role in associational discussion forums etc. On the other hand, members connected exclusively by formal means may feel more marginalized than ever because more interactive events and developments are taking place from which they are excluded.

*Fifth*, it may be hypothesized that widespread an intensive online communication has the effect of bringing the whole collectivity into more “fluid” state: by reducing the degree to which formal rules and past traditions are observed, because all norms and behavioral expectations can easily be discussed and modified in ongoing processes of communication. In other words: a basic change from “mechanic management” to “organic management” can be enacted.<sup>30</sup> In particular, this implies that the distribution of power and influence may follow less the lines of formal authority, but varies more in accordance with “functional authority” as it is emerging in constantly ongoing processes of communication.

*Finally*, it may be expected that collectivities get more fragmented because interactional integration cannot produce so much unity and homogeneity as integration on the level of formal organization. This problem will rise exponentially with increasing size of membership, because the larger the system, the smaller become the percentage of all logically possible social relationships that can be realized, and because interaction will tend to concentrate in subgroups characterized by a specially high level of consensus or homogeneity among its members. Consequently, we may see many hitherto “monolithic” collectivities falling apart into a number of subgroupings, because the encompassing non-interactive means of integration (e. g. collective symbols, common frames of formal rulings etc.) become weakened.

Methodologically, this all means that it becomes more viable to view voluntary associations as “social networks” which have to be analyzed in terms of the transactions

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<sup>30</sup> For definition of these terms, see Burns/Stalker 1961).

going on among its participants and the volatile types of ties and relationships emerging among them (Monge 1987; Haythornthwaite 1999).

On the other hand, it may become less fruitful to see voluntary associations

a) as formal organizations (by focusing on legal statutes, structured role and status systems, formalized rules and procedures etc. etc.)

b) as “communities” (by focusing on subjective motivations and identifications).

To the degree that these new “Global solidarity groups” cling to purely informal principles of internal organization, they remain highly invisible to external observers – to monitoring police agencies and sociological researchers alike.

Even worse: they remain opaque to themselves, so that participants typically lack the knowledge about who else is participating, to what extent values or goals are shared consensually. or even: and what kind of strategic activities will follow next.

Consequently, continuous efforts of empirical research are necessary to provide information about their size, composition, values, goals and activities, and to assess their “real” impact within the whole network of (e. g. governmental, economic and associational) transnational actors.

### **13. The new focus on multiple target campaigning**

Net-supported worldwide movement activities are particularly successful when they are addressing events, developments or problems which have identical characteristics all over the globe. This has been vividly exemplified by the “International Protest Day against Police Violence” (initiated by a Canadian action group at the 14./25. of March 1996), which was orchestrated by demonstrations, seminars, concerts, lectures and other events in many different countries (stretching from Spain and Sweden over Croatia and Serbia to South Africa, Brasilia and Bangladesh.):

*"By using e-mail on a global scale, the Montreal group was able to involve people in a dozen nations and gather follow-up reports on events, without the high cost of using telephones or faxes. Even more remarkable: The activist who did most of the group's outreach, Dee Lecomte, had first gone online just two weeks before the effort began, and she didn't use anything beyond basic e-mail. Nor did she need to." (Krause 1997).*

Contrasting to most conventional movements which attempt to influence (or overturn) a single center of concentrated power, online campaigns are most adequate when it is crucial to have an impact on many different decision making agencies (e.g. parliamentary representatives or the government of different communities, provinces or nations).

A case in point was the worldwide campaign aiming at the prohibition of landmines (in 1995), which has contributed to the result that 123 government have signed the respective international agreement:

*"Perhaps the most successful harnessing of the Internet to push political change has been the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. The campaign used e-mail to help coordinate the activities of hundreds of non-profit groups in dozens of countries."<sup>31</sup>*

Likewise, virtual labor union campaigns are more promising in rather decentralized economic environments where the main problem is to exercise influence on many independent smaller firms, regional associations or local political agencies – not in the

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Demko: Acting up On Line. In: The Chronicle of Philanthropy.  
<http://philanthropy.com/articles/dir/v10.dir/il2.dir/12advocacy.htm>

classic sphere of macrocorporatist structures, where conventional lobbying techniques may remain as indispensable as in the past.

Even in cases where a single powerful decision maker is addressed, online campaigns often tend to create an impact by a summation of many different smaller-scale activities. This was illustrated by the famous “Bridgestone campaign” (initiated by the ICEM<sup>32</sup> in 1996) which succeeded in pressuring this big employer by a multitude of concerted smaller actions aiming at its shareholders, clients and suppliers.

Similar conditions hold in the protest against the delayed wages of Russian workers – again initiated by ICEM in 1997 – which was based on the premise that apart from the Russian Government, many other actors (e. g. international banks) shared the responsibility for the lack of liquid resources:

*“With this second “Cyber-Campaign” wherever you are in the world you can not only express your solidarity with Russian workers and their trade unions but actively support them by sending protests to the World Bank, IMF and other international institutions, to the Russian government, to employers and regional administrations and to multinational companies and banks. All of these bear some responsibility for the hardship and suffering that Russian workers are now experiencing. You can add your voice to their formal complaint to the International Labour Organisation. This is an international issue and the Russian trade unions need international support to be able to resolve it.”*<sup>33</sup>

While the legitimacy (and impact) of online protest actions may be *enhanced* by the large number and heterogeneity of participants, it may well be *reduced* by the fact that participation is so accessible and effortless that it is not a valid indicator of high individual involvement. Thus, even very hesitant union member who have never been part of street actions or strikes may well be ready to sign online petitions or to send a pre-standardized e-mail message to the CEO of a specific firm. Evidently, such activities may easily become so inflated that neither the particular receivers nor the general public is significantly impressed. More than that, such actions may be counterproductive because receivers tax such messages as “spamming” like all other unexpected and unsolicited mail.

Consequently, it might be concluded that campaign sites on the WWW are only effective when they induce visitors to express their protests by more conventional means: by using snail letters or telephone, or by assembling at specific times on specific places. As an illustration, we may again mention the Bridgetown “Days of Outrage Action” in July 1996 which was successful because so many protesters contacted firm managers by fax or phone – using the list of phone numbers published on the ICEM site.<sup>34</sup> Unquestionably, such “action alerts” using the Net as a mobilization and coordination tool for *conventional* protest activities have proven to be highly successful in many different cases.

Thus, about 30 ecological activists in Utah have succeeded in preventing a Congress bill (aiming at the abolishment of protection zones) in 1995 by sending e-mails to about 30 000 other activists all over the nation: requesting them to contact their local representatives in this matter.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Worker's Union

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.icem.org/campaigns/no\\_pay\\_cc/about\\_campaign.html](http://www.icem.org/campaigns/no_pay_cc/about_campaign.html)

<sup>34</sup> See Amelia DeLoach (1996): Being Online. In: CMC Magazine, Nov. 1996,  
<http://www.december.com/mag/1996/nov/last.html>

<sup>35</sup> Paul Demko: Acting up On Line. In: The Chronicle of Philanthropy.

## **14. The diffuseness of online channels as an opportunity for exploiting wider ranges of individual motivations and behavior**

By increasing their responsiveness toward individual customers, clients and members, groups and organizations are increasingly confronted with the problem that the maintenance of highly specified goals and behaviors becomes more difficult because human beings are highly polyvalent entities engaged in diverse roles and endowed with heterogeneous and volatile values, identities and psychological motivations. In contrast to conventional media which aggregate individual contributions into few highly specified channels, online communication is extremely responsive to these divergent needs and orientations, because the same technical infrastructure opens a gateway to all possible modes of communicative behavior. Thus, to surf the Internet typically means to be in a highly polyvalent and extremely volatile social role. Within seconds, users may change from commercial to non-commercial sites, or from work-related to leisure-time activities, or from passive viewing to active communication. And given the functional universality of the PC as a device covering work environments and leisure activities alike, it is highly probable that communication partners exchange very different communicative items (text, pictures, videos, software programs etc.) and engage in highly variable (e. g. work-related and play-related, personal and impersonal) modes of communication. Consequently, there are many examples of studies that find rich, multiplex relations to flourish online, and include information exchange, social support, work and play (see Jones, 1998; Smith & Kollock, 1998; Sudweeks, McLaughlin & Rafaeli, 1997; Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1998).

From the point of view of Web publishers, this unspecificity and volatility imply high risks and high chances at the same time.

The *risks* include the insecurity to which extent users will go on reading to a specific document rather than switch to other pages or non-reading activities.

For any voluntary organization, the basic dilemma of going online is: providing a gateway into a world of infinite alternative information sources (all equally accessible within extremely short time): so that the union site has to compete for “user eyeballs” with sites of completely different nature (e. g. sex sites, political sites, media sites etc.). Thus, unions are exposing themselves to a highly critical test: whether the information they convey is competitive with all the other information available on the Net. And even more paradoxical: the more an association tries to motivate a heterogeneous (and/or weakly motivated) membership to visit its Webpage frequently (e. g. by offering a portal site loaded automatically whenever the user starts his/her browser), the more it has to provide opportunities for “personal customization” and gateways to many other sites: thus reducing the degree to which any focusing on common collective issues can be achieved.

On the other hand, the *opportunities* include the challenge of influencing effectively what users will do next: e. g. by inducing people who look at advertisements to order the product at the same session, or by inducing visitors of a campaign site to participate in votings or sign petitions.

Given this intrinsic unspecificity in the use of online media, users are in a constant state of openness for influences of all kinds. For instance, while individuals visiting a concert are specifically focusing on music and customers in shopping mall are just interested in buying nourishment or clothes, hooking up to the Internet does not imply any such restrictions.

Of course, users may go online for rather specific purposes, but there are no physical structures (like shopping malls or concert halls) to channel their attention to very specific activities or goals. On the contrary, they may have to exert constant self-discipline in order not to be distracted by any attractive links drawing their attention away to different, unexpected topics or non-anticipated activities.

For Web publishers, this diffuseness is a resource which opens them many opportunities not available in the real world. In particular, new symbiotic relationships can be exploited when actors with very different goals and affiliations enter into mutual profitable cooperations.

Thus, media publishers of all kinds (including the Encyclopaedia Britannica) offer their whole content freely by affiliating with commercial advertisers who see good opportunities to use their visitors as a market for profitable transactions; and whenever an association succeeds in attracting many users to its information sites or discussion fora, it can easily exploit this audience for increasing its membership or for winning support for collective actions.

Whenever a publisher succeeds in gathering visitors for any specific purpose, he can exploit this pool of “eyeball contacts” for a variety of other purposes – or he can ally with another publisher who pays for being allowed to engage in such exploitations. For instance, the premise may hold that whenever a customer is buying a product online, he is present in the Net not exclusively as a commercially minded consumer, but as an entire human being also susceptible to quite different (e. g. aesthetic or philanthropic) values at the same point of time.

If this is admitted, many far-reaching implications concerning goal orientation and behavioral rationality of online actors have to be faced. While we certainly don’t want to dismiss the notion that Internet surfers too tend to optimize utility (by minimizing costs and maximizing return), we have to accept that this concept assumes more ambiguity than in most offline settings.

To take an example:

When I maximize utility as a conventional buyer of books, I may do this by visiting the store with the cheapest prices – or in the case prices are equal: the store next to my apartment, or the one where I’m certain to get the most friendly service.

When I want to order books online, my situation is different in many ways:

*First of all*, many utility and cost factors are irrelevant, because all outlets are in equal “proximity” and “friendly service” is offered nowhere. Consequently, I’m in search for alternative selection criteria in order to decide where to buy my books.

*Secondly*, I’m likely to focus my mind not so exclusively on book buying than when I leave my house with the explicit intention of going to the store, because the Internet provides me a highly unspecified environment where I can easily satisfy very different interests almost at the same time. Consequently, maximizing utility may mean: maximizing the variety of different need-fulfillments within a given span of time.

Thus, online book buyers may well prefer e-vendors who connect book sales with quite different additional gratifications: e. g. by providing access to lively discussion groups and online communities or by convincing the buyer that his money will be instrumental for additional causes (e.g. for alimentering reputable non-profit organizations).

This logic is exemplified by GreaterGood.com: a site which opens a gateway for voluntary associations to raise funds by sharing the profits of online retailers:

*“The company helps not-for-profits build online shopping villages - annexes to their Web sites that allow supporters to browse through the offerings of more than 50 well-known online merchants like Amazon.com, OfficeMax.com, JCPenney and 1-800-FLOWERS. The exact configuration of the shopping village is up to the not-for-profit, which can select from among the available online vendors or reject those that seem out of place with their mission.*

*Of every purchase made, the not-forprofit receives a percentage of the price. Over the course of a year, the not-for-profits receive at least 5 percent of the sales made in its shopping village. GreaterGood.com designs, markets and manages the online shopping villages, all at no cost to the non-profit organization. Nor do the consumers pay anything extra; they pay the same price for goods they are buying to help their favourite cause as they would had they gone directly to the retailer's site. The only difference is, at least 5 percent goes back to the cause.*

*The retailers foot the bill for GreaterGood.com in order to gain access to the growing number of concerned consumers. Retailers pay what is called an affiliate fee, which ranges from 6 to 25 percent on each purchase. GreaterGood.com shares these fees 50/50 with the not-forprofit on a quarterly basis, and guarantees that the organization will receive at least 5 percent of the total receipts, and in many cases, more.” (Hair 1999)*

Evidently, this intermediary service provider is successfully empowering individual online surfers to maximize utility: by enabling them to satisfy economic and philanthropic goals *uno actu* with a single (polyvalent) transaction.

As a conclusion, it might be hypothesized that the fusion of different values and interest on the level of individual roles gives rise to isomorphic cross-alliances on the level of organizations or societal institutions, thus generating tactical relationships among extremely divergent collective actors which never had to do anything with each other in the past.

For voluntary associations, this implies that they face a more complex environment where survival and growth depends on the capacity to discover and exploit such surprising new symbiotic relationships.

This new symbiosis between profit and non-profit organizations is vividly exemplified by charity malls like “iGive-com”: a profit site living from sales commissions it gets for all transactions it stimulates in the name of any “worthy causes” (Kirby 1999):

*Excerpt from <http://www.iGive.com/>*

*Why Join?*

***Our members enjoy tremendous savings on purchases at our mall while supporting their favorite worthy causes at the same time.***

*First-time Shopper's Bonus*

***We'll donate \$10.00 to your cause if you make your first purchase within 45 days of joining.***

*Excellent Prices*

***Over 236 top merchants at the Mall offer spectacular prices and exclusive member deals on almost anything for home or office!***

***buy: books, cds, videos, electronics, clothing, toys, software & more!  
at: Amazon.com, Outpost, Reel.com, Barnes & Noble, Gap & more!***

*Six Degrees of Donation*

***We'll give you a \$1 for each referral you make who shops, plus \$1 for each shopper your friends refer--out through 6 degrees of referrals.***

*Virtuous Shopping*

***Your everyday online shopping earns between .5% and 20.0% for your favorite cause.***

*Virtual Karma*

***You can list and support your favorite cause, and even track your earnings, all at the site!***

Another illustration is offered by union sites which use their site to market products manufactured by union-friendly firms. By doing this, they provide their members with the opportunity to broaden the scope of union-related solidary action to their roles as consumers.

To the degree that e-commerce is expanding, we may see unions as new actors exploiting their member adherence for initiating B2C relationships which can be highly effective to the degree that widespread and stable member solidarity exists.

As a consequence, unions may increase their effectiveness because they have a new kind of positive sanction available for firms which are ready to fulfill their demands. (Darlington 2001).

Or stated otherwise: the Internet enables unions to transform member solidarity more efficiently into economic power.

## **15. On the Declining Functionality of (Large) Bureaucratic Organization**

Many previous arguments can be synthesized by the proposition that one of the most profound societal impacts of online communications results from their functional capacities to reduce the advantages of large-scale corporate structures and to undermine the classic (Weberian) principles of bureaucratic organization.

### ***15.1. The declining return for high investments in technology, professional staff and organizational structures***

The Internet opens vast opportunities to organize encompassing collective activities without the prior hiring of professional staff and the antecedent establishment of large-scale bureaucratic organizations.

Thus, the known dysfunctions of bureaucracies (red-tape, ritualism, inflexibility) can also be avoided: so that social movements can remain in a highly informal and decentralized states which allows all participants to express their spontaneous values and motivations.

*“Creating the foundation for dramatic change, the Internet has had a profound impact—in part by enabling organizers to quickly and easily arrange demonstrations and protests, worldwide if necessary. Individuals and groups now are able to establish dates, share experiences, accept responsibilities, arrange logistics, and initiate a myriad of other taskings that would have been impossible to manage readily and rapidly in the past.*

*International protests and demonstrations can be organized for the same date and time, so that a series of protests take place in concert. The Internet has breathed new life into the anarchist philosophy, permitting communication and coordination without the need for a central source of command, and facilitating coordinated actions with minimal resources and bureaucracy.” (CSIS 2000)*

In the realm of online communication, therefore, highly professional organizations are not likely to have much better functional capacities than rather unprofessionalized volunteer associations.

In fact, large, bureaucratized organizations may even experience bigger problems because

- they traditionally rely very much on top down communication, which is incompatible with the new network structures;
- they have to implement more formal rules and technical safeguards (e.g. firewalls), so that they cannot fully exploit the potentialities of a unregulated net (Clark 1995).

On the other hand, all their financial, technical and organizational capacities as well as their superior professional knowledge and personal skills are of little value insofar as successful online communication can be realized on a very low level of efforts and qualifications.

For instance, it has been found that technical communicators in firms typically have received very little formal training. Most skills necessary for net communication and Net publishing are acquired informally within the work process, or most often even during leisure hours at home (Silker/Gurak 1996). In other words: employing professionalized and highly paid communicators does not help much to improve the organization's Webpages and Web communication – as little as it helps to outsource online communication to specialized professional firms (like conventional advertising campaigns).

Thus, the Internet is apt to reduce the functional advantages associated with higher organizational size and professional skills.

In the case of labor unions for example, it is interesting to note that in the initial phases, online technologies were mainly applied by the union levels with rather low organizational resources: by smaller local and regional union chapters on the one hand and by the thinly-staffed international unions of the other. The – far more potent and powerful - national unions have followed only after 1990. This may be explained by the fact that national organizations felt less need for new communication channels because they were in control of highly sophisticated and widely established conventional print media - while infra- as well as supranational levels saw online media as a tool for compensating their deficiencies in these respects.<sup>36</sup>

### ***15.2. The growing “communicative marginality” of associational leaders***

In a second way, online communication challenges principles of bureaucratic organization because it doesn't lend itself easily to centralized formal control.

Conventional associational leaders and headquarters are accustomed to exercise tight control over the multilateral communication among members. Of course this is much facilitated by the fact that multilateral communications take place almost exclusively at official meetings which usually are prepared, organized and monitored by the associational staff and leadership.

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<sup>36</sup> Another paradox is that until today, the unions displaying the most intensive online activities are not those with computer-savvy members (e. g. unions organizing office workers or public servants), but organizations particularly busy in the field of internal education. Allen Schaaf (1996): Unions, the Rank and File, and the Internet. In: CMC Magazine, Nov. 1996, <http://www.december.com/cm/mag/1996/nov/schaaf.html>

Online channels allow multilateral interaction completely dissociated from organizationally embedded physical meetings – and thus outside the reach of formal associational control.

Members well maintain intensive networks of group communication without the knowledge and support of organizational staff – or they may use self-selected monitoring persons not appointed by the formal organization.

Nevertheless, the leaders may make use of the new situation by assuming an active role in online communication networks themselves: by providing disciplined monitoring and by guiding discussions in a way that they contribute to fact-finding, consensus building and to the legitimization of collective decisions. Doing this, they always remain in a precarious position because they can anytime be “dethroned” by informal moderators – or they may become irrelevant because new discussion forums emerge which rely on non-moderated horizontal exchange.

On the other hand, the role of leaders is considerably enhanced by the fact that “meetings” (e. g. board assemblies) are no longer restricted to hours of physical sessions, but become more extended by the use of computer-supported communication.

Thus, a need for “group facilitators” arises who are skilled to act in the preparatory stages of meetings:

*“Part of the facilitator's role is to conduct premeeting planning. This is the "make or break" preview time for your meeting. The facilitator needs to meet with the chief staff executive and chief executive officer to define meeting goals, identify premeeting tasks and materials, bring nuances among participants and politics and history to light, and discuss the expected flow of the meeting agenda.” (Daly 1996)*

Similarly, the role of chairmanship no longer finishes when assemblies are dissolved, because participants may wish to see summaries and results of their meeting on the WWW, to receive additional interesting materials – or just to continue their deliberations by electronic mail.

### ***15.3. The declining formal control over the spread of information***

Thirdly, digitalization lowers the degree to which information can be kept secret or at least under exclusive control within any defined system boundaries.

Whenever classified or secret information is leaking to an unauthorized recipient, it is highly probable it will copied, sent to other recipients, or finally even made public in newsgroups or the WWW. Thus, governments and organizations have to increase security measures so that nothing of this sort happens: because potential damage is far higher than in the past when stolen paper documents often remained at one single place (because nobody had the means for copying and distribution).

A wiser strategy may be to take possible publication into account from the beginning: so that even secret negotiations are enacted in a way that publicized minutes would not be too embarrassing for the participating organizations.

These new risks have been exemplified in the drafting of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) initially promoted by the OECD.

*“The temporary defeat of this initiative has been credited, in part, to the utilization of e-mail and Web sites to circulate information about the MAI, including critiques of both the content of the agreement and the undemocratic process of drafting it.(24) As a result of the outrage that this information generated, the Internet also became a vehicle for circulating and organizing a mobilization campaign against the MAI in dozens of*

*countries. Such mobilization put pressure both on the negotiators at the OECD and on member country governments.” (Cleaver 1999)*

From this case, Stephan Kobrin has rightly drawn the conclusion that because the Internet makes it difficult to maintain the secrecy of such elite negotiations it will be necessary for the institutional actors to increase their investments in generating widespread public support (Kobrin 1998).

#### ***15.4. The emancipation of members and subsystems from encompassing organizational controls***

*Fourthly*, the Internet makes it more difficult for any organized systems to keep the system level neatly separated from the level of subsystems or individual members. For instance, whenever the leadership of such an organization tries to present an “official” face to its environment, it is likely to be counteracted by any internal subgroups or individuals publishing on their own. As a consequence, there is a tendency for system levels to collapse, because it is no longer possible to know which communications have to be attributed to the encompassing system or to subsystemic entities of any kind. This trend toward de-differentiation is vividly seen in cases of war where official governmental communications are superseded (and invalidated) by “internal witnesses” communicating their own experiences and views:

*”Postings on zamir from Tuzla in Bosnia-Herzegovina, on the occasion of the massacre of young people in the centre of town on what, in the previous system, would have been the Day of Youth, in May 1995, perhaps showed the network at its best. Three young people linked to zamir, Damir Kapidzic, Emir Prcic, and Adnan Demirovic, posted a number of simple messages portraying the horror of war, listing the names and ages of those who died.” (Stubbs 1998)*

The Zapatista movement shows that by using new Net technologies, modern social movements are able to spread information and to reach global public visibility within a very short time, without needing any support by conventional mass media. As a consequence, governmentally controlled media systems are no longer able to suppress any intranational information:

*„Modern computer communications, through the Internet and the Association for Progressive Communications networks, made it possible for the Zapatistas to get their message out despite governmental spin control and censorship. Mailing lists and conferences also facilitated discussions and debate among concerned observers that led to the organization of protest and support activities in over forty countries around the world. The Zapatista rebellion was weaving, the analysis concluded, a global “electronic fabric of struggle.” (Cleaver 1994)*

Generally, online publication channels are disposed to convey rather direct, “authentic” communications not distorted or by intermediary editing or filtering agencies and not delayed by any organizational or technical restraints.

A *first* reason for this stems from the fact that in contrast to classical advertisement campaigns or demanding paper publication, Web publishing tasks are less likely to be outsourced to specialized external firms, but are most often organized as “in-house activities” accomplished by employees (or volunteers) within the association. On the one hand, such “amateurism” certainly hampers the achievement of professional quality levels as well as the influx of complicated tactical considerations. But on the other hand, it

makes it easier to convey “genuine” information expressing exactly what the communicating association members think, feel and intend – and nothing else. *Secondly*, the Internet allows to propagate very quick “just-in-time information” because (in contrast to weakly, monthly or even yearly paper publications) there are no deadlines which collide with current events and developments and no operational delays by printing firms, distribution agencies or other intermediary actors. Of course, this lack of decelerating mechanisms is negatively felt when too spontaneous uploadings have to be corrected because in the meantime, heated emotions have cooled down or more rational, less short term argumentations have gained ground.

Given the low need for resources, skills and social cooperation, the Net facilitates the unpredictable emergence of single activists who act not only as initiators, but as effective organizers of far-reaching campaigns. Thus, it provides a new environment for the rise of charismatic “heroes” as the very antipodes of conventional bureaucratic officials and managerial leaders.

Similarly to the epic literature regularly associated with the primary discovery and conquest of new territories in the past, the first endeavors to colonize Cyberspace have produced a wealth of stories telling about the adventurous activities of single individuals who succeeded in their “mission impossible” against adverse circumstances and mighty countervailing powers:

*“Irene Weiser, who describes herself as “an average citizen from upstate New York,” wanted to do something to save the Violence Against Women Act. VAWA provides a major source of funding for domestic violence programs -- and was set to expire in 2000. Newspapers editorialized that the renewing legislation was doomed in Congress. The program Irene worked in was set to lose two staffers. She thought that was an outrage. A complete Internet notice, she decided the only way to save the program was through the Internet.*

*Working with a firm of Internet professionals, E-Advocates.com, she mortgaged her house to embark on a one-person campaign over the Internet to save VAWA. Weiser created the Web site stopfamilyviolence.org and wrote heartfelt personal letters to everyone she knew and urged them to do the same. In just 12 weeks, her e-mail and web campaign generated more than 160,000 e-mails to Congress. Some 36,000 people signed up for her e-mail alerts, and vowed to keep up the fight until the legislation passed. In October, 2000, the Senate re-authorized VAWA unanimously, five days after the House of Representatives did so by a vote of 371-1. President Clinton quickly signed the bill into law.”(Buie 2000)*

While it may never be ascertained to what extent Irene’s web campaign were in any way decisive for the Congressional decision, there is no doubt that such anecdotal stories are widely hold true: providing new nourishment o the old American myth that any individual can successfully stand up against “biggest powers” whenever he/she chooses to be fully committed to a specific cause.

Another famous case is the Nobel Prize Winner of 1997; Jody Williams from Vermont, who used the Internet successfully to create pressure for an International agreement on the banishment of land mines:

*“As an actor on the international diplomatic stage, Williams' campaign has no precedent, it is an organization in name only, with no staff or office of its own.... Williams said her computer allowed her to keep supporters up to date on the latest news and to feel the momentum of their movement. ‘From day one we recognized that instant communication was critical,’ she said. ‘It made people feel they were a part of it.’ The campaign was successful in pressuring more than 89 countries to sign an international treaty banning land mines. ‘This victory is in large part due to the Internet... For the first time, a*

*coalition of NGOs has had an influence on the security of the entire world without being a superpower,' Williams said.*"<sup>37</sup>

Despite these empowerments of lower organizational strata, many inequalities in the usage of the new media persist which are more related to personal characteristics than to the formal status within the association. Thus, it is not surprising to find union discussion groups dominated by males of younger age and higher education: individuals not quite apt to represent the average union members.<sup>38</sup> In addition, international union communication is badly hampered by the dominance of the English language which is usually not mastered by workers of non-Anglo-Saxon countries. This handicap was quite manifest in the case of striking Brazilian docker workers in Santos who were able to establish worldwide contacts only because the British Labournet was helpful to translate their core documents into English.<sup>39</sup>

As this volatile new "communicative Internationalism" is not structured by frameworks of formal law, contracts and organizations, it is shaped primarily by informal factors on the level of psychology and culture.

As a consequence, all these new movements are directly vulnerable to fragmentations stemming from differences of language, values or behavioral styles. (Waterman 1999). *"Some of this was demonstrated at the LabourMedia97 event, when prominent Western labournetters shocked the Korean majority by either public displays of temper, or by brusquely telling their hosts how they ought to be sucking their electronic eggs. Neither the Western, nor the Southern (a South African woman), nor the energetic and innovative Koreans themselves, moreover, showed sensitivity toward women, awareness of feminism....."* (Waterman 1999).

More than that: the lack of formal organizational mechanisms (e.g. equal voting rights for all members) opens that gate for highly informal inequalities of influence of power based much more on "cultural capital" than on material resources.

### ***15.5 The decentralization and informalization of extra- and trans-associational interactions***

The bureaucratic character of traditional labor unions and most other established associations is particularly manifested in their tendency to keep external relationships in the monopolistic control of their leadership and a restricted group of peak functionaries. Evidently, this centralization facilitates speedy decisions and effective collective action, the maintenance and public display of a specified and consistent "corporate identity", the cultivation of reliable relationships to other centralized collective actors (employer, parties, other unions etc.) and the regular participation in corporatist political structures. On the other hand, bottlenecks may result from the fact that the few authorized elite members are easily overloaded when many and intensive external relationships to different actors and on different levels have to be managed at the same time, and many member categories may find their own demands ignored because they have no

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<sup>37</sup> Washington Post Oct. 11th, 1997

<sup>38</sup> See for example Eric Lee: Workers Unite. Labor Unions are moving to the Net to forge worldwide solidarity.

(<http://www.iw.com/print/monthly/1995/08/workers.html>)

<sup>39</sup> Intersindical Portuária de Santos (Brazil)

<http://www.portodesantos.com/sindicatos/>

representative who articulates their views vis-à-vis the employers or governmental agencies.

Undoubtedly, such centralized structures are supported by conventional mass media which make it impossible for non-elite members to “go public” on their own or to cultivate intensive informal communication without the knowledge and consent of associational leaders.

This is particularly seen in the case of international unions in which only peak members have the resources for maintaining regular relationships to national member associations (e. g. by visiting worldwide conferences or by centrally produced and distributed written publications).

By contrast, online technologies empower all members and subgroups to engage in autonomous external interactions, so that many more actors than in past will contribute to the public appearance of the association, and apart from the “official” relationships maintained by the leaders, many transorganizational contacts and alliances on much lower levels (e. g. between parallel specialized work groups in different associations) may come into existence.

Given these developments, cyber-unionists seem well advised to complement their tactical knowledge by studying the activities of new alternative movements (e. g. ecological or feminist groupings) (Waterman 1999).

In a rather moderate version, these new tactics have been exemplified by the famous dockers of Liverpool who occupied Montreal gantry crane in June 1996 in order to gain the support of their Canadian colleagues in their fight against the CAST shipping line. As this action did not get any attention by the British newspapers, the dockers at home could only be informed by publishing Canadian press articles (which have appeared in the Montreal Gazette) on the union’s Website. This same Web publication was unexpectedly successful because it helped to mobilize the support of the “Maritime Union of Australia” as well as a Japanese docker union.<sup>40</sup>

*“These 500 or so men have been locked out by their employers for two years or more. For most of this time they have been actively engaged in international communication activities to obtain solidarity for their cause. They have used solidarity conferences, docker visits abroad, production of tee-shirts, posters, videos, and the internet. They have not - yet - defeated their employers and government. But they have on more than one occasion dramatically forced their will on both the national and international union organisations that claim to represent them. Because of their combination of old and new methods of struggle, of the local and the global, of international solidarity and communication, I call these the Zapatistas of Western Europe.” (Waterman 1999)*

Interestingly enough, this pioneering campaign has not been initiated by new kinds of “knowledge workers”, but by a “very old kind of working class: male, manual or clerical, proudly local, identified with their work community.” (Waterman 1999).

Such examples illustrate how the Internet can help to actualize international union solidarity on a very tactical, operative level, because cooperative relationships can be established and extended “on the spot” within very short time.

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<sup>40</sup> Greg Dropkin (1996): Sending a Strike Message in a Bottle. In: CMC Magazine, Nov. 1996, <http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1996/nov/dropkin.html>

This new “pragmatic internationalism” contrasts with the traditional labor movements where international solidarity was mainly an ideological construct and a rhetorical mantra – regularly evoked in solemn World Congresses but rather inconsequential on the level of concrete collective action. The main reason for this was the fact that on the level of formal organization, labor was focusing extremely on the national level: with its opportunities to influence governmental decision making by lobbying or by participation in oligarchic neocorporatist circles of power. (Waterman 1999)

By contrast, the Internet seems to give rise to a new “operative Internationalism” of labor which is based neither on common ideology and values nor on far-reaching formal contracts and organizational structures, but on current ad hoc-issues and on fluid, constantly changing processes of communication (Waterman 1999).

This implies that the scope and intensity of transnational worker solidarity and the success of coordinated transnational actions is less dependent on formal union policies, inter-union relationships or intergovernmental agreements than anytime in the past:

*“...the IFBWW<sup>41</sup> Website specializes in building global solidarity. It's "Latest News" page is filled with stories of injustice -- and the struggle against injustice. Stories often include practical ways unions and individuals can express their support for such struggles. For example, the most recent account is about woodworkers in the Solomon Islands, fired from their jobs, and the strike in seven camps against the company. In a down-to-earth example of practical international labour solidarity, the story recounts how an Australian union flew in a labour lawyer to help defend the workers against a corporate legal attack. An appeal is made for financial support for the workers, who need such basic items as salt and rice. Fax numbers are provided for those who wish to join the mounting protest.”<sup>42</sup>*

At a time where employment conditions and industrial relations become more and more homogenized due to global market liberalization, multinational corporations and the internationalization of law, the Internet is very functional for the unions in order to keep pace with these developments and to transfer experiences made at one place to many others.

Thus Australian Unions have found it necessary to learn from American Unions the practices of “enterprise bargaining”, because they increasingly have to engage in such negotiations themselves:

*“Industrial legislation worldwide is becoming more similar with every change in government and legislative amendment. The US system of 'collective bargaining' is very similar to the 'enterprise bargaining' system that is now challenging Australian unions. Contact with overseas organizations has become almost essential particularly if we are all to avoid reinventing the wheel.”<sup>43</sup>*

While broader member strata than ever will become involved in extraorganizational communication, many inequalities in the usage of the new media nevertheless persist: differences which are more related to personal characteristics than to the formal status within the association. Thus, it is not surprising to find transnational discussion groups between unions dominated by males of younger age and higher education: individuals not

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<sup>41</sup> International Federation of Building and Wood Workers

<sup>42</sup> Labour Web Site of the Week: The First Year.  
<http://www.solinet.org/LEE/labour22.html>

<sup>43</sup> See Andrew J. Dunn (1996): Shaping a Web for inclusion. In: CMC Magazine, Nov. 1996,  
<http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1996/nov/dunn.html>

quite apt to represent the average union members.[38] In fact, international union communication is badly hampered by the dominance of the English language which is usually not mastered by workers of non-Anglo-Saxon countries. This handicap was quite manifest in the case of striking Brazilian docker workers in Santos who were able to establish worldwide contacts only because the British Labournet was helpful to translate their core documents into English.[39]

### ***15.6. The reduced significance of formal representation and delegation***

Finally, institutionalized structures of deliberation and decision making become eroded because there is less need for formal delegation and representation.

The functional necessity for representation – even in associations tightly committed to grassroots democracy – stems mainly from the fact that it is technically impossible to ascertain the opinion of all rank-and file members on any significant issues – particularly when much information is needed and little time is available for decision. In addition, representation allows the formation of smaller bodies able to engage in deliberations and negotiations, while larger aggregates of members cannot do anything else than deliver their votes.

When online communication becomes ubiquitous, mechanisms of representation are weakened like many other intermediary structures. *First of all*, there is less need for representative roles or bodies, because opinions of very large membership bases can be empirically assessed by surveys or straw votes within rather short times.

And secondly, the position of such representative agents is weakened because they can no longer just pretend to speak in the name of a consensual “silent majority”. Instead, they may be confronted with the expectation to ascertain the attitudes of their clientele before they take position – or they may be “falsified” ex post by dissident members using e-mail (or protest Websites) to articulate their dissatisfaction.

In particular, representatives find it ever more difficult to assume the role of “trustees” who rely on their own inner judgment when deciding what is best for their clientele. Instead, they are more driven toward the role of responsive “delegates” who see themselves just as authentic transmitters of member opinions, without assuming a personal responsibility of their own.

But it is even more probable that they will adopt a new role as “facilitators” or “consensus catalysts” by engaging in an extensive virtual discourse with their clientele: trying to synthesize divergent opinions and to hammer out new integrative concepts in order to maximize support and legitimization.

On a very general theoretical level, it might be hypothesized that by increasing system complexity and system volatility, online communication reduces the degree to which organizational activities and performances can be deliberately controlled and predicted. Typically, organizations install Websites and intranets with the aim of facilitating the distribution of information, and of increasing the efficiency in storing, retrieving and transmitting data relevant to their activities. This rather narrow view regularly ignores all the unintended second-level effects associated with the new means of communication: effects which can easily erase the intended goals or induce completely unpredicted new developments (Gundry/Metes 1997). While explicit intentions by management focus on centralized top-down communication, the members typically tend to shift the use to more informal horizontal and diagonal communication (as well as to extraorganization interaction).

As a result, organizations experience a major change in their entire system of (internal and external) communication: a change management can neither predict nor control.

External interaction is less and less monopolized by formal managerial channels; intended gains of efficiency goals may easily be neutralized by information overflows which absorb precious working time of all collaborators; and high priority information does not get the needed attention because members and officials are too much absorbed by less urgent news (Gundry/Metes 1997).

## 16. On the Organizational Prerequisites for Successful Web Communication

While traditional bureaucratic structures seem to be rather irrelevant (or in some ways even detrimental), associations nevertheless need some organizational capacities in order to make extensive and effective use of the new Net technologies for internal and external communication. This is particularly true for Web activities because Websites have to fulfill increasingly demanding requirements in order to attract the “eyeballs” of many users.

1) Webpages have to be updated frequently, because their attractiveness depends heavily on the actuality and variability of their content. Given the rather easy tasks of daily updating on the one hand and the perpetual flow of site visitors on the other, Web publication endeavors are prone to become highly continuous activities which are best taken care of by regular employees *within* an association. Consequently, considerable work discipline is particularly needed for being very quick in updating pages (e. g. to announce unexpected events like the death of members etc.). In particular, the leadership has to engage more regularly than in conventional publication endeavors (e. g. when two issues of a journal or newsletter are edited every year).

2) Websites have to convey a consistent public image and identity of an association. As all subsystems always have the opportunity of “going public” themselves, this unity of appearance has to be based on a voluntary commitment of all members and subsystems to a single coherent publication strategy (usually implemented by the headquarter). In order to generate this coherence, associations may have to install more powerful mechanisms of internal consensus-building and legitimization.

3) Ideally, associational Websites have to mirror all major aspects of organizational activities. Consequently, the members or functionaries charged with Web publication have to be placed in the very center of intraorganizational communication. In particular, they have to be universally acknowledged as “clearing agencies” who are disposed to receive, filter and forward anything of interest going on anywhere within the system. In addition, extensive cooperative relationships have to be built up in order to secure that various work groups or local subunits regularly report their activities and announcements.

Overall, there is certainly an edge for associations which can either rely on at least a small paid professional staff or on highly motivated and regularly active volunteer members. Given the low and sporadic work<sup>44</sup> commitments of most (even rather activated) association members, it seems evident that Webmaster responsibility has to be shared by different individuals (Pells 1998). As a consequence, we may hypothesize

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<sup>44</sup> Thus, it is not astonishing to find that the Journal edited by the ASAE (“Association Management”) is increasingly filled with articles related to associational Web publishing (and other Net related activities)..

particularly within unprofessional associations, that Web publishing often causes a shift toward centralization: because only very few highly active members supply the needed continuous commitment,

Even more staff expansion may be necessary when the site results in high bottom up communication: so that officials at the headquarters are busy to answer emails from members or the general public.

*“In the not-for-profit world, the introduction of new technology, specifically introducing the use of electronic mail and establishing a presence on the World Wide Web, seems to have demanded new staff resources rather than less.*

*The American Cancer Society, with relatively little promotion of its site, receives over 100 email messages per day and an assistant spends ninety percent of her time answering the emails that While some organisations use autoresponders to alleviate the workload generated by electronic mail alone, the mission and substance of their work often cannot be satisfied by one or several standardised messages. At a recent workshop entitled "The Virtual Activist," one representative from a national organization with a small staff said that the biggest reason that it had not even procured an electronic mail address is that there was no spare staff to deal with the traffic. The Internet requires quick, immediate responses and many not-for-profits do not have the resources to deal with this burden, need to be addressed individually” (Kotamraju 1998).*

As a new ubiquitous in-house-activity based on identical principles of hardware, software and design procedures, Web Publishing increases the degree to which all voluntary associations are similar to each other. As a consequence, they all have more reasons to look at each other and to learn from each other even if they are active in completely different spheres. Thus, Web activities add the field of overarching associational problems and tasks which are articulated by respective meta-associational associations (like the ASAE: the “American Society of Association Executives”).

## **17. The New Unlimited Options of Combining Public, Semipublic and “Private” Social Communications**

The immense functional unspecificity of computer networks implies that they are equally fitted for processing public, intraorganizational and completely private (or highly classified) communications. In fact, while the WWW allows to give information the utmost degree of publicity (because they can be retrieved anytime anywhere on the globe), Email messages encrypted by PGP may well represent the most secret form of technologically supported communication, because in contrast to phone talks or radio transmissions, they cannot even be deciphered by governmental police or secret service agencies.

In his book “fundraising in the Internet”, Michael Stein gives labor unions the advice to establish Web sites with two layers: a public zone accessible to everybody and a more exclusive zone for formally registered and paying members.<sup>45</sup>

This recommendation is based on the realistic premise that even in the online age, Mancur Olson's argument is still true that in order to prevent “free riding”, associations have still to motivate members by distributing selective incentives not accessible to outsiders: e.g. by giving them insight into more confidential documents, by providing opportunities to

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Stein: Tools you can use online. <http://fundrisingonline.com/book/ch3.html>

participate in high-level discussions or to ask experts for professional advice, or by opening channels for initiating into personal contact with leaders and high-ranking officials.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from offering selective incentive, providing nonpublic zones accessible only to formal members has other useful functions.

*First*, they offer a channel for propagating sensible information which should not be available to employers (e. g. information relating to future strike or boycott activities) And *secondly*, they offer better possibilities to encourage free talk and solicit honest opinions.

Behind this “semi-public” sphere, there may even more secretive communicative exchanges based (e. g. by mailing lists including only leading elite members and/or incumbents) on formal roles.

In fact, the most important intraorganizational online communications may be those least visible for outsiders (and therefore: least amenable for social research): bilateral or multilateral contacts among board members who use e-mail for circulating classified materials, preparing sessions or deliberating on important decisions.

The establishment and refinement of such multilayered communication systems represents a new major organizational task involving all parts of an association on a continuous basis.

Designing such “communication policies” is a complex and highly demanding endeavor because decisions “what shall be communicated on what channels” have not only to be guided by considerations of functional efficiency, but also by reflecting the expressive, symbolic aspects inseparably connected with all strategies and acts of communication. Thus, the establishment of an “inner circle” reserved to registered members has the effect of headlighting the salience of the formal membership in a new way. And to know about the existence secretive “mail-lists” used by leaders can cause non-leaders to feel more marginal than ever, because there are now more centralized communication processes from which they are systematically excluded.

The larger the spectrum of different communication technologies and transmission channels, the more norms have to be created and the more careful reflections have to be made in order to decide which modes should be used in which situation.

Thus, making phone calls or writing snail mail letters has different symbolic connotations since sending Email is a ready alternative options; and still selling paper documents on order can appear more “nasty” in times when they could as well be published for free on the WWW.

## 18. Conclusions and Outlooks

We have started this text with the premise that voluntary associations are particularly prone to embrace the new Net technologies, because on the basis of these new tools, they are better able to be what they always aspired to be: democratically constituted collectivities relying on a complex interplay between internal and external, vertical and horizontal, upward and downward, informal and formal, bilateral and multilateral communications.

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<sup>46</sup> Olson, Mancur, 1971: passim.

Considering the immense polyvalence of online communication technologies, it seems rather safe to predict *that* they will be used in ever more extensive ways; but paradoxically, this same versatility (which is increasing with the spread of every new hardware appliance and software application) makes it very hard to forecast *which* uses will predominate in the near and more distant future.

On a very general level, Kubicek seems to be right in stating that the Internet – as the most flexible, adaptive of all media – has very different functions and consequences under different environmental conditions, so that it can be fitted into almost existing socio-cultural settings and is more likely to consolidate and strengthen them than to act as a causal agent of change.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, the conclusion is warranted that primary face to face interactions as well as conventional mass media communications will not become obsolete with expanding computer-supported interactions. On the contrary, they may have to be expanded and intensified before the full potentials of online communication can be exploited.<sup>48</sup>

More than that: online interactions provide the background in front of which the manifold functions and merits of conventional communication modes appear in a new light: For example, they make more visible to what extent physical meetings of all kinds are not instrumental for facilitating multilateral verbal communication but fulfill many additional expressive functions as well: e. g. by ritually reinforcing common values and norms, or by providing opportunities for socio-emotional gratifications.

Looking at the years immediately ahead, the following developments are very likely to encourage the application of net technologies in associations, and to reinforce at least some of the trends identified in the sections above:

1) As the number of Internet users will increase, more and more associations will reach the point where they can expect the large majority of their members to be hooked up. Arriving at this threshold, they can realize disproportionate cost savings and functional empowerments by switching from conventional to online communication strategies in a fundamental, encompassing way: e. g. by giving up their paper editions of journals and newsletters or by forcing members to use online channels for various transactions (e. g. renewing membership, notifying address changes, subscribing to special services, paying yearly contributions or for articulate demands, grievances or proposals). Especially for larger associations, the advantages connected with such fundamental changes will be so considerable that they will readily help poorer members to become hooked up (e. g. by offering them cheap computers or by subsidizing their ISP).<sup>49</sup>

2) The very rapid diffusion of mobile Internet appliances (palmtops, organizers, cellular phones) will have the consequences that almost everybody can be online almost everywhere and under all environmental conditions. Consequently, it will be even more true that volunteers will be able to relate to their associations at any time, within any social setting and without interrupting any other (e. g. private or occupational ) activities.

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<sup>47</sup> Herbert Kubicek: *Demokratie im Netz - Vernetzte Demokratie?*  
<http://www.heise.de/bin/tp/issue/tp.htm?artikelnr=8002&mode=html>

<sup>48</sup> For example, Website addresses have to be made public by press publications when the number of visitors is to be increased.

<sup>49</sup> This is well exemplified by the “workingfamilies.com”.- Initiative of AFL-CIO which aims at hooking up almost all of its 16 Mio members by selling them low-price PC's and offering them cheap providing services (see: <http://www.woringfamilies.ibelong.com>).

Thus, the volatility and unpredictability of participation and influence pattern will increase even more, and effective collective activities will even become more independent from any organizational frames or environmental conditions.

3) The introduction of legally valid signatures will destroy the last refugium where traditional snail mail letters have still remained indispensable up to the present. At least theoretically, associations will become able to practice all their formal activities and procedures over the Net: admissions and withdrawal of members; payments of compulsory fees and voluntary contributions, legally binding elections and votings – and even the holding of statutory meetings or the signings of contracts with other organizations.

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