

The Internet, Disintermediation and Campaign Groups

A study of the development of the Internet, its effects on grassroots campaigning, and the future prospects of the larger campaign groups

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Introduction

This article is part historical account, a reflection on my work with many campaign groups in the UK, Europe and the USA, and a distillation of future trends that will affect how we organise to create change in the future. For those already on the Internet, it should hopefully guide your thoughts on how to develop your future work. For those of you not on the 'Net I hope this serves as an introduction to the main concepts and keywords that you will be bombarded with in the media over the next ten years.

In the business world, particularly amongst the globalised corporations, there is currently much debate about '*business to business*' (also called B2B) e-commerce¹. In the immediate future, the public will not rush to buy their goods over the Internet – primarily because they don't trust the medium to look after their money or deliver the goods. But large businesses see the Internet and e-commerce as a way of enabling users and suppliers to get together easily and '*cut out the middle man*' – hence the use of the term 'disintermediation'. In countries like the US or Japan, B2B and *disintermediation* are big issues because although it will save industry money, it will also render a large section of the service industry – retailers and wholesalers – redundant.

Does the change in relationships the Internet creates in the business world have any relevance in the world of campaigning and lobbying? I believe it does. The same force that threatens the wholesalers today in areas where business is seeking to buy online is also forcing change on campaign groups. The large, membership-based campaign and lobby groups are particularly vulnerable. In my view, as the Internet enables ordinary people to access information directly, and work together in *virtual networks*², the role of the major campaign groups must change or they will be taken out of the loop.

The Growth of the 'New Media'

The interchange between individuals has, in recorded history, been one of the main avenues for creating change. A few hundred years ago individuals could only speak to each other. This required physical contact, and so limiting contact between people frustrated change. Although the moveable-type printing press was developed in 1450s, it did not actually assist in the development of change for some time because shortly after its creation the state responded with censorship. It also took time because states did not develop free education for the general public, and hence widespread literacy, until the last two centuries.

Over history, public-led change has always required the 'weight of numbers' as a means of demonstrating power. That is not so much the case today. In the Twentieth Century, with the development of censorship-free spoken and written communications, the opportunities for lobbying and creating change have grown. In the Twenty-First Century we could conceivably see the end of the mass-movement in social change as the power of the *new media* gives individuals the ability to take *decentralised* or *distributed* action. By 'distributed', it means that rather than there being one 'hub' or centre of

¹ There's a good paper on businesses development of B2B e-commerce from The Fisher Center for Information Technology & Management at <http://www.stern.nyu.edu/%7Embloch/docs/roadtoec/ec.htm>

² A 'virtual' network is a group of people, linked by electronic media, who cannot meet as an ordinary 'group' but are able to work collectively on common issues.

activity – there are many hubs, working independently, to enable action.

The role of the *new media* to this process of change is inseparable. The 'new media' are a collection of communications technologies that have developed a mass-market over the last fifteen years. These give many more people the ability to communicate, exchange ideas and organise. In general, they can be summed up as:

- Improved telecommunications – not only in terms of the availability of telephones, but also fax machines, and the lower costs of these communications;
- Enlarged mass-media – which in turn requires more information to feed it, and hence creates more opportunities for information to be spread;
- Word processing – the ability to store, compose and exchange documents on a scale and quality not comparable with manual typewriting or printing;
- The Internet – enabling truly global communications, not just point-to-point through email, but also as a mass-media through the World-Wide-Web.

More significantly, every advance in the new media over the recent years has usually favoured community groups and campaigners at the local level because it has reduced costs, increased public accessibility, or enabled easier use by those originating information.

The Origins and Growth of the Internet

The Internet, in the view of many working for social and political change, is '*a military experiment that escaped*'. In 1965, Paul Baran of the Rand Corporation³ in the USA was asked to design a nuclear bomb-proof communications systems. He then drew up the basic principles of the Internet. It was immediately rejected by the American military because they feared that the lack of central control over communication would challenge the command structure – a very prophetic pronouncement on Baran's ideas. But, in 1969, the US Congress approved funding for the Arpanet⁴, and within a few years, when this system penetrated further into universities and large corporations, the Internet was born.

What made the Internet significant was not just its structure. Rather it was the development, from the late 1970s onwards, of the personal computer. When the Internet was first thought-up only large organisations could run computers. They were big, expensive machines that took large numbers of specialists to operate them. More importantly, all networks for communication were *centralised* on these large machines. The growth of the personal computer, particularly with the standardisation brought about by the IBM PC in the mid-80s, enabled ordinary people to 'join in'. Hence, a system that was only intended for the power elite began to become available to ordinary people. The future of the Internet will be dependent upon a symbiotic evolution of communications technology with the machines that enable the public to access the potential of *distributed* networks.

Ten years ago, there was no Internet outside a few hi-tech businesses and universities. I began using the Internet in 1989 and had access at home in 1991 (which makes me rather an 'old timer' in 'Net terms). Over this time the main innovation that has enabled ordinary people to access the Internet, rather than just 'geeks', is the graphical interface. The same feature is true of personal computing, when in the mid-80s Apple, and then Microsoft, invented windows-based graphical interfaces for the personal computer. The development of the World-Wide-Web – a graphical interface used to access data on the Internet, which is basically all a web browser is – enabled people to get past the terse and technical jargon that was a pre-requisite of using the Internet before 1994.

The use of the Internet has exploded since the introduction of the Web in 1994. But it is still restricted to people who have personal computers. Now it is likely, that over the next five years, we will see the use of the Internet explode at a pace far outstripping the growth experienced since 1994 due to:

³ For those of you interested in the origins of the 'Net, the Rand Corporations have placed the original documents online at <http://www.rand.org/publications/RM/baran.list.html>

⁴ Arpanet – Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency Network

The development of non-computer-based means of accessing the Internet – in particularly access via your TV;

The increasing use of 'broadband' information access via cable and fibre-optic links in the home – for example the new ADSL⁵ system being rolled out by telecommunications companies this year – enabling far more information to be moved around; and

The development of mobile access through the next generation of mobile phones and portable computers, using the 'wireless applications protocol' system' or 'WAP' (if you read the financial pages you'll see a lot about 'WAP' at the moment because its effects are anticipated to be so significant).

It is important to understand the historical concept of how the Internet has evolved in order to understand its significance for the future⁶. For example, it took just over twenty years, from the introduction of trunk-dialling for the telephone to become the norm in most households. It took just over ten years for the colour TV to become the norm from its introduction in the mid-70s. The Internet is possibly more significant because it is both a means of entertainment *and* communication. In six years Internet access has grown in the UK from only a few hundred thousand people to a few million. The development of cheaper, simpler and more easily used form of access will rapidly increase this figure.

The Internet and the Mainstream Campaign Groups

The growth of the mainstream campaign groups during the 1970s/1980s represented a need by the public for information on 'current' issues. It also represented dissatisfaction with the conventional political process as a means of solving problems. Membership of a large group was a means of finding out what government, industry and other campaign groups were doing about issues of concern. The average person did not have the means, apart from the poor service provided by national newspapers, to get information on current events in specialist areas. The role of campaign groups, as providers and campaign leaders, enabled people to access this information relatively cheaply and easily. Irrespective of whether people like being in big, centrally controlled organisation, they had to be. There was no other effective way of organising to achieve your aims.

Today the Internet threatens this role⁷:

- By enabling people to communicate cheaply, and directly, it cuts out the need for people to facilitate communication for you – you have control yourself.
- As governments, corporations, and in particular other campaigners, dump more of their information on the Internet, combined with the availability of automated search tools on the 'Net to browse it, it becomes easier for individuals to locate information themselves.
- By enabling people to work together in distributed networks, a group of people sharing a common interest can collectively have a far greater work capacity and resources than the large campaign groups themselves.
- For a far smaller use of time, resources and money, a similar impact can be made through distributed working (for example, a lot of the work related to genetically modified food has been achieved through distributed networking).

It is easy to see the significance of the Internet when you consider the sort of people who are using it. Some of the most active local campaigners get onto the 'Net because it's the place to work with others similarly motivated and obtain information. It is also significant that some of the larger campaign groups use of the 'Net is restricted to either issuing certain types of information – for example press releases. Or they use it to 'direct' others. But very few of the large campaign groups use the Internet for the purposes it was first put to – developing ideas and actions co-operatively. This has caused, and continues to cause, tensions with the more active members at the local level.

⁵ ADSL – *asynchronous digital subscriber line* – a high capacity telephone connection for the delivery of data and video into homes/businesses that is intended to compete with cable TV's currently restricted broadband network using existing lines.

⁶ On the first Wednesday of every month the Financial Times has a special 'Information Technology' supplement that is a valuable source of information on current trends and future technology.

⁷ I have a more detailed paper entitled *The Detractor's Convention* online at <http://www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/rangers/theory/detract.htm>

I have had feedback from some large campaign groups who are still refusing to use the Internet either because they perceive it as 'too difficult' or they cannot control its use, or, because they think that using the 'Net disadvantages those who are not on the 'Net from taking part. This latter argument is ultimately self-defeating since there will always be people who, by choice, will not want to use the Internet, in the same way as today some people refuse to have a telephone on the house. It also shows a clear ignorance or misunderstanding of the power of the 'Net not only to improve their work with their active members, but also, in certain circumstances, to take active members away.

The large groups 'centralised' mentality must change. Before the 'Net if people didn't like the approach of the large campaign groups they had no other viable option to follow. They had to agree with the big agenda, or leave. Having been around long enough to see people's use of the 'Net develop, it is interesting to see how when local campaigners for national campaign groups get onto the 'Net, a slow process of 'liberation' takes place. Through the Internet, local campaigners not only improve their local work, but the link to other campaigners on similar issues provides help, support and training. Therefore, as they develop links across the 'Net they become less dependent on the central organisation for support. In this situation the large campaign group is no longer the font of all knowledge and, if they do not listen to their active members, the active members will take their goodwill and talents somewhere else.

This effect of 'liberating' disaffected group members is just the first part of the disintermediation effect – diminishing the importance of the large campaign groups in the work of local activists. The more serious effect will not be realised for another few years. In future, as the 'Net become a more important mass-communications media, the large campaign groups may not only lose their local activists. As local activists' abilities to use the 'Net develop the target audience of the large campaign groups will have more choice, particularly on local issues. Faced with a far greater choice of options on how to campaign, complain or lobby, even the public may switch allegiance. The message the large groups are trying to promote may become too reserved, generalised, conceptual or mundane, in comparison to the more practical and direct approach of many local activists working through distributed networks. The larger budget of the national campaign groups also makes very little difference to this. The 'Net can be used as effectively by the individual who knows how to write a good web page, containing some good ideas, as the multi-million pound corporation presenting a carefully engineered PR-front.

Convergence

The boom in the Internet has been driven over the last few years by business speculation. The Internet itself is a wholly privatised system, run by various corporations and telecommunications bodies who run the infrastructure on a profit-making basis. The communications-led boom in 'Net-use is therefore primarily a business venture. But there is another important force shaping the future of the 'Net – *convergence*. Compared to the effects of disintermediation, the effects of convergence could be far more significant.

Convergence is a technological principle whereby different media will be merged to provide one unified communications channel. Your computer will merge with your TV (this is well underway). Your mobile and home telephones will become equipped with email and Web capabilities (this will be in place within eighteen months). But, as the technologies merge, what becomes more important will be the ownership of 'content' – the information, images, programmes or sounds/music. This is why there has been a recent scramble to update copyright laws to meet the challenges posed by the Internet, and also why telephone companies have sought mergers or alliances with mainstream broadcast or printed media corporations.

The delivery of 'convergence media' in the future will require both technology providers, and programme content, which is why there has been so much jostling for position today. The great concern is that as the media converge, and media ownership inevitably concentrates⁸, the media will cease to cover issues outside the mainstream. The fact that much of this media is sponsorship or advertising funded could also put pressure on editors' freedom to cover 'fringe' issues – particularly

⁸ This issue is currently the subject of a consultation by the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in advance of a proposed *Communications Reform White Paper*. See information on the consultation/proposed scope of the reforms at –
http://www.culture.gov.uk/creative/dti-dcms_comms-reform_white_paper.html

campaign issues. In response new, low-budget form of media could arise, such as Web radio and TV broadcasting. But the currently 'mainstream' campaign groups would have to compete alongside all the other 'fringe' issues for space, so reducing their impact.

Transferring action from the real to the virtual world

Campaigning has many tried and tested means of getting a point across in order to influence decision-making. But in the virtual world, there is not yet a widespread move towards 'e-activism'. What efforts there have been by large campaign groups tend to be focussed on duplicating their 'real world' work.

This situation is likely to change over the next eighteen months. As the number of people on the 'Net increase, as do the numbers of politicians and decision-makers for them to target, e-activism becomes a more realistic prospect. To date a lot of e-activism has merely augmented or paralleled real-world campaigns. That is not the case today. During 1999 there has been an increase in the number of groups promoting e-activism, inspired in part by the pioneers of e-activism, the *Zapatista's*⁹ and the *Electronic Disturbance Theater*¹⁰. Many recent 'Net based campaigns have been related to Internet rights, or abuse of the 'Net by corporations. But the move towards transposing real-world action to the Internet has been developed further over the last few months. Groups such as *the electrohippies collective*¹¹ have sought to develop virtual parallels such as 'virtual sit-ins' and 'virtual lobbying'.

The Internet is not just being used to duplicate real-life campaigning. Increasingly new tools are being developed that enable small groups to develop new, uniquely Internet-oriented means of campaigning. Much of this relies on the most important role of the 'Net – a means of communicating information to a mass audience. This directly challenges the '*creating power through big organisations*' role of the transnational campaign groups because small groups of people can develop huge capacity. This is enabled by borrowing and 'virtually connecting' many small Internet resources to produce web sites or campaign resources with as great a capacity as the sites of the large transnational campaign groups or corporations¹².

Reform, Co-operation or Mediocrity

These are the choices facing the large campaign groups today. As we move from centralised social systems and means of expressing political and social choices to decentralised and distributed ones, the nature of campaigning must change. The role of the large campaign groups will not be redundant in a world where expression and discourse are far more open and accessible – but it must change. Likewise, the role of the individual 'activists' must change if they are to fully use the opportunities the new media presents.

There has been a clear trend for the more active local campaigners to get onto the Internet. The driver for this has been access to the resources and opportunities the 'Net provides rather than specific information and resources being provided by the national campaign groups. For some campaign groups the old orthodoxy's of central control over the organisations agenda have been challenged. This is through people at lower levels in the organisation working or communicating on issues independently of the 'hub' of the organisation.

More importantly, local active members are becoming less dependent upon the central organisation for providing the resources and assistance they need. This can be obtained by working with like-minded people over the 'Net. There have

⁹ The Zapatista Tactical Floodnet – <http://www.aurorablue.org/projects/rdom/zapsTactical/zaps.html>

¹⁰ Electronic Disturbance Theatre – <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/wray/ecd.html>

¹¹ the electrohippies collective – <http://www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/ehippies/>

¹² A new publication, entitled '*Distributed Networking – or how small groups can run big actions*', is due to be published on the electrohippies website in a few weeks.

already been examples, with at least three of the major campaign groups¹³, of organisational conflicts created by an increasing level of 'Net-assisted' local autonomy. More can be expected if campaign groups do not serve the needs and wishes of their 'Net-based members to be more involved in planning and taking on projects.

However you look at the internal relations of an organisation, the major responsibility must fall on those at the centre to change their ways. As the 'Net provides cheap and easy communications within the lower ranks of organisations, the central management of those organisations cannot hope to retain control of the debate and comments of the work of that organisation. What's more important, if they do try and re-establish some form of central control, they are unlikely to be able to enforce that position without losing their most active local members. The 'Net provides the resources the local campaigner needs, so cutting the tie of dependence on the organisation. Therefore, unless the larger campaign groups open up their policy and agenda setting mechanisms to more inclusive consultation with the lowest levels of the organisation, their local talent will desert them, or just fade away.

Disintermediation and convergence are as challenging to the corporate world, to governments and political parties, as they are to campaign groups. The loss of power the new media forces upon those who control and influence society has many implications.

The larger campaign groups will have to change. But the members of those groups at the lower levels will also have to take on a more active role. In a world where an ever-increasing level of media-choice creates more background noise, only those who can develop novel and direct ways of communication with the public's consciousness will be able to effect change.

The level of noise through the mainstream media will also encourage more groups to decide to opt-into the 'inside-track' for lobbying (which will always only be possible where there is a large, centralised organisation). Or opt-into the 'outside-track' for true campaigning, where debate takes place in public. With the continual decrease in the standing of politicians, scientists, and other in positions of responsibility in society, those on the 'inside' track run the risk of becoming, in the view of the public, part of the problem they are seeking to address. In the communications melee that greater use of the Internet will bring, they will also find it harder to manage and defend their image too.

The Future – Ideas are Everything

In my view, the future for the large campaign groups is not to be leaders, but *providers*. Not people who tell people what to do or think, but instead suggest options and solutions. This has been one of the more important aspects of the Internet – allowing people to develop their own perception and understanding. In a communications media where the individual can be bombarded with different and mutually exclusive order and facts, providing material that enables someone to determine their own position is far more valuable.

Only if they use their position to 'provide' the basis for individuals to take-action themselves, rather than doing it centrally, will the current large campaign organisations be able to exploit the distributed basis of the Internet. And only by developing distributed action will they be able to develop the capacity necessary to take on the increasingly centralised media empires that will operate the new convergence media. This must be the ultimate test – in a world where size does not matter the capacity to develop and use ideas is far more important than how many members you have, or what politicians sign your motions. At the qualitative level this will be quite a problem for these groups. What it represents for them is providing people with analysis rather than sound bites, options rather than condemnation.

Despite some excellent work to date, campaign groups also, either locally or globally, only use a fraction of the future potential of the 'Net. This is primarily because there is not really a 'critical mass' of people online in any one country – with perhaps the exception of the USA – to make action effective. That will change. And in order to adapt to that change groups and individuals, at the national and local level, need to start to consider how to use these new social and political forces now. In particular, how they can engage and manipulate the communication opportunities enabled by the new media.

¹³ For the moment, I cannot identify these groups because of needing to protect information sources.

In a world where you can work easily on an issue with anyone who shares your interest in your town, your country or the whole globe, it is harder to lead action on the basis of your large organisation having some sort of superiority. What will matter in the future is not size, but ideas. This is one of the revolutions that's currently grasping the financial world. In a future where 'intellectual property' is far more valuable than tangible assets, the old notions of the size or strength of an organisation breaks down. Ideas, and the ability to use them, are everything in the Information Age.

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