

Social Movement Networks Virtual and Real

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The rapidly growing role of “computer mediated communication” (henceforth, CMC) has attracted considerable attention from social scientists and prompted extensive discussions of its possible impact on social organisation (Castells, 1996; Wellman et al., 1996; Cerulo, 1997). In this paper I discuss the impact of CMC on social movement activity. CMC represents an unusual form of communication, as it does not really fit conventional distinctions between public and private, and direct and mediated communication. It may be expected to affect collective action in both instrumental and symbolic terms, by improving the effectiveness of communication and facilitating collective identity and solidarity. At the same time, the heterogeneity of social movements prevents us from formulating generic arguments about their relationship to CMC. Accordingly, I briefly discuss the potential consequences of CMC on three different types of movement organisations: organisations mobilising mainly participatory resources, organisations focusing on professional resources, and transnational networks (Tarrow, 1998; Diani and Donati, 1999). The exercise generates a few general hypotheses that in the conclusions I relate to broader assessments of current trends towards a “virtual society” (Calhoun, 1998).

CMC, Political Activism, and Social Movements

We can regard social movements as networks of relationships which connect informally - i.e., without procedural norms or formal organisational bindings - a multiplicity of individuals and organisations, who share a distinctive collective identity, and interact around conflictual issues (Diani, 1992a). This definition identifies several dimensions of social movements that CMC may be expected to shape.¹ These include a) the behaviour of specific movement actors, individuals or organisations; b) the relations which link individual activists and organisations to each other (Diani, 1995a; della Porta and Diani, 1999, chap.5); c) the feeling of mutual identification and solidarity which bond movement actors together and secure the persistence of movements even when specific campaigns are not taking place (Rupp and Taylor, 1987; Melucci, 1996). Treating movements as networks also makes the relationship between movements and their spatial location most explicit. Contemporary social movements have developed historically in parallel to the emergence of a public sphere located in specific physical and cultural spaces, namely, in societies defined by national

¹ Although this view of movements has been proposed as a synthesis of approaches focusing on the Western historical experience, recent research suggests it might well apply to collective action in other areas of the globe (Foweraker, 1995; Desai, 1996; Kurzman, 1998; Rothman and Oliver, 1999).

boundaries, specific infrastructures and common cultural traits (Tilly, 1978; Calhoun, 1992a; Emirbayer and Sheller, 1999; Tarrow, 1998).

This view of movements broadens our understanding of the relationship between CMC and movements to include issues of networking and identity building. Among potential questions to be addressed are the following:

- a) how do forms of individual participation change?
- b) how do SMOs modify their ways of operating?
- c) how do individuals and organisations connect to each other to exchange/pool resources and information?
- d) how do these actors develop identities and solidarities?
- e) how do the geographical boundaries of the network change, along with the underlying idea of public space?

This is a massive - and admittedly daunting - research programme; in this paper I focus in particular on communication between individuals and organisations, and on the spread of collective identities. I pay hardly any attention to individual participation, nor to broader changes in the public sphere. There are good reasons why CMC should affect political activism significantly. The spread of electronic mail may facilitate communication between local and national branches of the same organisation, as well as among the members of local, national, and transnational coalitions; it may also strengthen the linkages between individual members and their organisations.

Communication technology allows to set up discussion groups between individuals interested in a specific issue, thus encouraging interaction and starting polyadic, rather than dyadic, communication dynamics. Finally, the World Wide Web not only offers the opportunity of making crucial information for campaigners easily accessible from websites, but also makes it conceivable the independent existence of “virtual” co-ordination networks like the Institute for Global Communication (www.igc.org) and the different thematic networks (WomesNet, EcoNet, PeaceNet, LaborNet, and ConflictNet) which it hosts.²

Potential advantages stemming from CMC (Myers, 1994, pp.252-257) include the higher speed and the reduced costs of communication among sometimes very distant actors; the persistent accuracy of the original message and the overcoming of the traditional problem of distortion, so common when communication spreads by way of mouth or through summaries by intermediaries; the potential to promote interaction between branches of organisations and/or movement activists; the opportunity to

² Myers (1994) presents a broad overview of these themes.

transform sets of geographically dispersed aggrieved individuals into a densely connected aggrieved population, thus solving one key problem of mobilisation (Tilly, 1978; Rheingold, 1993, chap.8).

These traits of CMC surely increase the possibility of launching campaigns on a scale, and with a speed, previously unheard of; but does this entitle us to conclude that new types of actors are emerging, rather than there is simply greater efficiency in social movement action? In particular, should we expect the emergence of new types of “virtual” social movements, disconnected from a specific location in space and without reference to any specific “real” community? To address these issues we need a preliminary - if brief - discussion of the peculiarity of CMC vis a vis other, more conventional forms of communication.

CMC and “Conventional” Communication

A proper assessment of the impact of CMC requires at least a working typology of communication forms. Mine is based on the distinction between the private or public nature of communication, namely, its accessibility to third parties; and on its direct or mediated form, where by “direct” is any form of communication based on face-to-face interaction.³ These distinctions generate a four-fold typology of forms of communication.

Private and direct communication includes all exchanges which take place in the course of face-to-face personal interaction between movement activists; occasions range from confidential meetings - e.g. of leaders or restricted boards - to discussions within primary groups to all those types of exchanges where information needs being restricted within the boundaries of the group.

Private and mediated forms include all the occurrences in which transmission of information and ideas takes place through some technical device, regardless of the level of technical sophistication. Examples range from ordinary mail addressed to members/sympathisers, to telephone calls, to use of e-mail messages. The degree of privacy of these forms of communication may be subject to quite substantial variation: for example, many circular letters addressed to all the members of mass organisations

³ Snow et al. (1980); Diani and Donati (1996). Cerulo and Ruane (1998) present a sophisticated typology of forms of interaction which goes beyond simple dichotomies like direct vs. mediated.

are usually drafted in such a way as to allow for the possibility that the content of the message become known beyond its original targets. Still, communication here is not primarily designed, nor organised, to reach a public outside given group or organisational boundaries.

Public and direct communication takes place mostly in public spaces, for example on the occasion of public demonstrations or recruitment initiatives. Public addresses, the distribution of leaflets, the very act of marching in a street carrying banners or placards constitute as many communicative acts which directly (try to) engage the targets of the messages in face-to-face interaction - although the purpose of such activities, and their communicative traits, obviously go beyond direct interaction, aimed as they may be at attracting mass media's attention too. Direct public communication may also occur in those "semi-public" spaces which constitute the subcultural fabric of social movements: cultural centres, coffee shops, alternative art venues, community associations, etc. (Polletta, 1999). I refer to them as semi-public because while they have no formally restricted access - many of them are in fact no substantially different from ordinary facilities of the same kind - still movement free spaces are often so heavily shaped by their most regular clients' profiles to discourage people with different persuasions and lifestyles from attending them at all.⁴

Finally, *public and mediated* communication includes all mass media related forms. These may consist of press releases, advertising and information campaigns - radio and television adverts, paid announcements in newspapers, etc. - but also of careful strategic "manipulation" of the media through spectacular activities. The selection of movement agendas as well as of their leaders or spokespersons on the basis of their estimated potential impact on the media might also be regarded as an example - possibly an extreme one - of "mediated communication" (Gitlin, 1980).

CMC stands in a somewhat ambiguous relationship to these forms of communication. Its private or public nature is unclear. On the one hand, CMC represents a new version of public communication: not only websites, but also discussion lists or e-mail rosters may be accessed with limited efforts (although access to specialised lists may be easier for those who belong to a specific subculture, search engines make the task relatively easy for outsiders too). On the other hand, as long as access to Internet technology is

⁴ For example, despite their cultural activities being in principle open to the public at large, autonomous youth centres in Italy (Lumley, 1990; Dines, forthcoming) or in Germany (von Dirke, 1997) may be characterised in this way given their pronounced countercultural profile.

heavily skewed in favour of better educated, and/or higher income groups, then the public nature of CMC may be subject to question (at least by comparison to verbal mass media: printed media in the early, golden - at least by Habermasian standards - age of the public sphere might bear more than a passing analogy to the process of limited access described here).

There is however another reason why the public nature of CMC is questionable, and has to do with the difficulty to identify the senders of a message as embodied (individual or corporate) actors, with a specific territorial location. Unless they want to be identified, there is no way to break the anonymity of senders of computer-mediated messages. This breaks with the view of the democratic public sphere as a space where information are exchanged, and opinions debated, between actors prepared to take responsibility for their stances. In itself, there is nothing new in this: after all, especially - but not exclusively - in authoritarian regimes, dissenters of all sorts have regularly circulated messages without making themselves identifiable by the public (which here of course includes repressive agencies). What is perhaps peculiar, however, is the possibility of reciprocity and interaction that CMC allows on a much easier and accessible scale than previous forms of communication. While the leaders and activists of underground guerrillas or other clandestine groups could traditionally be contacted only through difficult, uncertain, and potentially dangerous negotiations, and subject to the identification of reliable intermediaries, the process is much easier in the case of CMC: that e-mail addresses can be accessed from any location and are located nowhere enormously facilitates dealings with political actors on the hide. The masterly use of CMC by Deputy-Commander Marcos in Chiapas, and the opportunity he had to establish regular e-mail contacts to the media, while remaining inaccessible to his opponents, provides an excellent - if frequently mentioned - example (Castells, 1997, pp.68-84; Knudson, 1998).

Likewise, CMC is strictly speaking neither direct nor mediated. On the one hand, the technological medium offers a potential for interaction that other mediated forms of communication largely lack. Exchanges of letters between different branches of an organisation require much longer than similar exchanges on the e-mail, to the point of modifying qualitatively the nature of the interaction. More over, in contrast e.g. to telephone communication, which also allows for interaction, CMC - especially in the context of discussion lists - may involve a multiplicity of actors and thus start interactive processes which extend beyond the originators of the exchange. On the other hand, it is disputable whether the warmth and intensity of direct, face-to-face communication may be found in computer-mediated interactions. Although the

emotional nature and the depth of virtual experiences and exchanges have been repeatedly underlined (e.g. Turkle, 1997; Cerulo and Ruane, 1998) it is still unclear to which extent the two experiences can be comparable. This applies particularly to the problem of the sources of trust which are expected to support interaction among people mobilising in social movements. Collective action requires long term commitments and the willingness to engage in projects which rely upon the contribution of all the parties involved for their success; one has to wonder to which extent virtual interactions are capable of generating mutual bindings of the necessary intensity (Calhoun, 1998). Accounts of “virtual communities” also suggest that most interactions taking place in the virtual sphere actually expand on and reinforce face-to-face acquaintances and exchanges, instead of creating new ones (Wellman et al., 1996; Virnoche and Marx, 1997).

CMC, Community Forms, and Movement Organisations

Differences between CMC and dominant forms of communication do not necessarily lead to significant changes in the way social movements operate. We can address this issue by looking on the one hand, at the efficacy of existing patterns of communication; on the other hand, at the possible creation of new communication channels. Beyond the instrumental contribution to more effective mobilisation attempts, the most important question is whether CMC may contribute to “catness” (Tilly, 1978) by transforming mere aggregates of people sharing the same condition into a social network, and thus a more easily mobilisable group. People exposed to diffused, but in principle individual grievances, which do not entail specific social linkages, and are therefore difficult to turn into collective demands - e.g., permanently ill people, disabled people, victims of road accidents, drug addicts and their relatives, etc. - may be expected to profit heavily from the opportunities for connection offered by CMC. The same may apply to groups with specific socio-economic positions and interests, but whose social and geographical isolation discourages collective action - as in the case of the contribution of CMC to the organising of American Mid-West farmers (Rheingold, 1993, chap.8).

In this section I would like to discuss the contribution of CMC in relation to different organisational forms of social movements. Although one should not posit a rigid correspondence between organisational and communicative forms, still the different solutions the former offer to mobilisation problems might well reflect variation in the latter, in turn eliciting different impacts from CMC. Social movement organisations (henceforth, SMOs) differ first of all in their *resource mobilisation strategies*. Some of

them focus on *professional resources* (in turn made available sometimes from public authorities or private sponsors, but more frequently from sympathisers' membership fees), others on *participatory resources* (Oliver and Marwell, 1992; Diani and Donati, 1999). They also differ in their availability to adopt *confrontational strategies*, and the resulting need to take this opportunity into account when designing their organisational profile (Diani and Donati, 1999).

One has also to take into account the fact that most organisations mobilising at a transnational level are either federations of national chapters (e.g. Friends of Earth International) or coalitions of groups (e.g. the Climate Action Network) *with no individual membership*, which again identifies a different set of problems CMC may contribute to (although a surprisingly high proportion of those groups - about one fifth according to a recent survey [Smith, 1997, pp.52-53] - still have individual membership).

Finally, CMC may have a different impact depending on the characteristics of the population social movements want to mobilise. A recent typology of real and virtual community forms (Virnoche and Marx, 1997) differentiates between situations in which actors share the same geographical space regularly (as in the case of urban communities), intermittently (as in the case of employees of the same firm, students of the same school, or members of voluntary associations), or never (as in the case of people sharing some broad world-views, interests, or concerns, but with no opportunity for direct, face-to-face interaction). The introduction of CMC in such different contexts generates quite different types of virtual social systems. Following Virnoche and Marx (1997) I will refer to them here as *community networks*, *virtual extensions* (of real intermittent communities), and *virtual communities*, characterised by potentially anonymous and purely mediated patterns of interaction.

Movement organisations mobilising mainly professional resources. Many environmental groups which had a participatory profile - e.g., WWF or friends of Earth - have recently evolved significantly towards a model where a restricted group of professionals promotes campaigns funded by passive members' contributions (Diani and Donati, 1999). Other examples may include conservation groups like the National Trust or consumers' protection bodies like Which?⁵ On the more radical and confrontational side, Greenpeace provides the best example of a "professional protest

⁵ None of the examples mentioned totally rules out ordinary members' active participation. But their role is fairly limited by comparison to the role of professional bodies at the centre.

organisation". Organisations such as these need mobilising a membership as vast as possible in order to secure the resources to support their professional bodies. All of them address causes which may attract widespread consensus among public opinion and are in principle little controversial - although the specific solutions advocated and, especially in the case of Greenpeace, tactics adopted may be strongly controversial. Consistently with their emphasis on professional structures, a large section of these organisations' grassroots constituency is dispersed and not organised, including as it does all individuals sharing similar broad views on a given set of related issues. In this case, while it is important to reach potential constituents quickly and at low cost, there is comparatively little need to develop specific strong identities - precisely because members do not need specific incentives to mobilise directly. CMC may increase the effectiveness of communication to ordinary members, strengthen perhaps their identification by offering some opportunity for a modest involvement in the organisation debate, but with no major impact in terms of identity building and maintenance. The most likely outcome of the introduction of CMC is the conversion of dispersed communities of sympathisers into virtual communities with a slightly higher degree of interaction. The efficiency of the headquarters may also be expected to profit from technological innovation, but no substantial change is likely given the already professional nature of the central bodies. CMC is likely to be most important for organisations combining professionalisation with confrontational strategies like Greenpeace. Advanced communication technologies may indeed facilitate dramatically the circulation of news which is so essential to Greenpeace's campaigns.

Movement organisations mobilising mainly participatory resources. Here the picture is radically different. The very existence of these organisations is based on the involvement of the grassroots and on the provision of - ideological and solidarity - incentives to direct action. Standardised communication from central bodies is usually inadequate in these cases. When mobilisation takes place on a national scale it usually relies upon connecting structures provided either by the local branches of the organisations, or (perhaps more frequently) by other types of organisational infrastructures. These may include other types of associations and informal networks operating as "transmovement free spaces" (i.e., relational contexts in which activists of different movements may come in contact, thus developing a shared understanding which guarantees the continuity of collective action across time and space; or they may consist of "indigenous networks" (associational networks of all sorts, not directly related to social movements, but which none the less provide the context for social movements to develop - e.g. the Black churches in the case of the 1960s civil rights movement in the US); or of "prefigurative networks", countercultural and/or

communitarian settings where movement activists and sympathisers experiment with alternative lifestyles.⁶ Whatever the specific form of these networks, CMC may be expected to reinforce already existing ties rather than creating new ones. Sustained collective action is unlikely to originate from purely virtual ties if they are not sustained by previous interaction - as many (e.g. Wellman et al., 1996) suggest to be the case most of the times anyway. In Virnoche and Marx's (1997) terms CMC may be expected to generate community networks - like in the well-known case of Santa Monica, where community virtual networks were behind the successful mobilisation for the provision of elementary facilities to homeless and dispossessed people (Rheingold, 1993, chap.8); or virtual extensions, where ties developed through involvement in associational and other direct networks generate and are in turn reinforced by electronic communication.

Transnational organisations. The impressive growth of movement organisations on a transnational level has been well documented.⁷ So has their tendency to operate through coalition and network forms (Sikkink, 1993; Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco, 1997; Tarrow, 1998, chap. 11). It is possible to identify several forms of transnational contentious politics. Tarrow defines transnational social movements as "sustained contentious interactions with opponents - national or nonnational - by connected networks of challengers organised across national boundaries..... [it] is important ... that the challengers themselves be both rooted in domestic social networks and connected to one another more than episodically through common ways of seeing the world, or through informal or organisational ties, and that their challenges be contentious in deed as well as in word" (1998, p.184). Other forms of transnational contention include cross-border protest diffusion (where actors copy from each other but then develop largely independently within their own national boundaries), political exchange ("temporary forms of cooperation among essentially national actors that identify a common interest or set of values in a particular political configuration": 1998, p.187), and transnational advocacy networks. These differ from transnational movements in that they lack the embeddedness in dense networks of face to face, daily interaction which is essential to the spread of collective action. In other words, advocacy networks are networks in the sense of connecting structures, but not in the sense of social networks (Tarrow, 1998, p.188). While it is possible to identify a few

⁶ I borrow this threefold typology of "free spaces" from Polletta (1999). For illustrations and related theoretical arguments see Rupp and Taylor (1987); Roseneil (1995); Whittier (1995); Melucci (1996).

⁷ Using the Yearbook of International Organisations as her source, Smith (1997, p.47) identifies 183 transnational movement organisations in 1973, 348 in 1983 and 631 in 1993.

genuine transnational movements (e.g., the peace movement in the 1980s, or fundamentalist Islam), they are outnumbered by advocacy networks on environmental, women's, or human rights issues (Porter and Brown, 1991, pp.50-59; Smith et al., 1997; Webster, 1998), usually composed of former militants and activist organisations, who connect to promote shared values yet without any form of grassroots structure (Sikkink, 1993, p.412). Although these networks may promote the resources for the development of domestic social movements (Tarrow, 1998, p.192) they should not be regarded as social movements in their own right.

The distinction between movements and other forms of transnational contention is not particularly relevant as far as the practical impact of CMC is concerned. The contribution of CMC to the effectiveness of communication is most decisive as it goes beyond the improvement of the performance, to make the very existence of these networks possible.⁸ Massive use of e-mail dramatically increases the co-ordination capacity of groups co-operating on both broadbased campaigns like those on global warming or Third World debt, or on more specific initiatives aimed at pressurising specific companies or governments. It may also prompt the foundation of specific organisations like the Climate Action Network, a coalition of environmental and scientific associations concerned with issues of global warming and pollution, which conducts the large majority of its business, including decision-making processes, through e-mail.

The distinction is more important from the point of view of identity construction. What Tarrow calls "transnational social movements" are affected by CMC in a similar way as participatory movements operating within national boundaries and facing the problem of mobilising their own constituency. As for "advocacy networks", CMC may strengthen identities and solidarities among their members by increasing the rate of exchange between geographically very distant activists and organisations, and therefore the density of what is, however, a very peculiar constituency. Its peculiarity lies first of all in its consisting of an elite of mostly professional campaigners rather than of a "transnational public opinion" in the broader and more conventional sense of the term. Accordingly, this prefigures a pattern of computer mediated interaction which is proximate to the "virtual extension" model rather than to the "virtual communities" one. Although members of the transnational NGO sector do not strictly interact on any regular basis, they none the less have fairly regular - if rare -

⁸ It is worth noting, though, that even transnational forms of campaigning are far from new in absolute terms, as 19th century anti-slavery and Irish nationalist mobilisations suggest (d'Anjou and van Male, 1998; Hanagan, 1998) .

opportunities for direct face-to-face interaction on the occasion of international conferences and other related meetings - not to mention the ties originating from previous shared professional or educational background (McAdam and Rucht, 1993).⁹

CMC, Social Movements, and the Emergence of Virtual Society

How does the above discussion relate to the much broader debate about the impact of CMC on contemporary societies? It has indeed been suggested that CMC will dramatically affect a whole range of fundamental human activities, from work organisation (e.g. through telecommuting) to democratic procedures (as reflected in the advent of “electronic democracy”) to the multiplication of personal identities and the self (for summaries of the debate: Rheingold, 1993; Friedland, 1996; Hacker, 1996; Wellman et al., 1996; Purcell, 1997; Turkle, 1997).

Focusing on the relationship between politics and community, Craig Calhoun (1998) has underlined the impact of mass media, and in particular television, over the territorial dimension of political activity. Revolutions in contemporary history were peculiarly urban phenomena, strongly embedded in a specific space, both in terms of the recruitment of activists and of the deployment of revolutionary events. This was particularly true of 19th century revolutions (e.g. the Paris Commune: Gould, 1995), but also applies to the Eastern European 1989 revolutions. That the importance of locality persists so long in Eastern Europe is due to very high centralisation of the state apparatus which validates the idea that a core power centre still exists (Calhoun, 1998, p.378). In contrast, the homogenising impact of television in the West has turned “revolutionary” events like 1968 into global phenomena, to the loss of the peculiarity of specific mobilisations in specific campuses or cities (and also, he adds, to the loss of such events’ revolutionary potential (Calhoun, 1998, p.378).

Although CMC may facilitate political and social participation through “the maintenance of dispersed face-to-face networks,” the development of cultural and “socio-spatial enclaves,” and the technical support to interest group activity (Calhoun, 1998, pp.383-385), its contribution to the creation of new types of communities, and to the spread of new democratic practices based on principles of discursiveness and

⁹ A very distinctive version of this type - which can also be found on a national level, though - is represented by virtual networks of extremist organisations, e.g., neo-nazi ones. They seem to rely extensively upon the anonymity guaranteed by CMC to exchange information and co-ordinate violent campaigns across borders. Again we might be witnessing a combination of “virtual extension” and “virtual communities” processes operating here.

consultation, is far from clear. First of all, most examples of personal interaction in electronic discussion groups actually miss some of the requirements usually associated with the idea of community. Participants in those lists often hide their personal identity, participate occasionally, are not tied in any sort of committed relationship, and are mostly involved in dyadic or at most triadic interactions (1998, p.380). Moreover, examples of community networks such as WELL in the Bay Area or the Santa Monica network suggest that virtual networks operate at their best when they are backed by real social linkages in specifically localised communities, while their capacity to create brand new ones is uncertain (see also Virnoche and Marx, 1997). Finally, the overall democratising impact of CMC may be severely hampered by two types of resource constraints: while its contribution to networking among citizens' organisations is undeniable, its contribution to the operations of social control agencies, the military, governments and corporations is - at least quantitatively - much greater; and, access to CMC is at least for the time being heavily correlated to class and status. In sum, CMC seems to reflect inequality rather than overcome it (Calhoun, 1998, p.381; see also Myers, 1994; Friedland, 1996; Hacker, 1996).

Some of these remarks may be unduly pessimistic. The speed at which CMC is spreading in the US and other Western countries leads one to wonder for how long will CMC remain inaccessible to lower-income social groups; nor should one discount the possibility that CMC may be affecting power holders' and challengers' opportunities in different ways - by incrementally increasing the former's control capacity, while opening up largely new opportunities to the latter. This would qualify the claim that CMC merely reflects existing balances of power. Still, my brief discussion is broadly consistent with Calhoun's argument. The potential to build "virtual [social movement] communities" seems highest among sympathisers of movement organisations who act mostly on a professional basis and on behalf of causes which have a vast resonance among the public opinion - whose radical, if not "revolutionary", potential is in other words relatively modest. By contrast, participatory movement organisations - usually the most radical - are more dependent upon direct, face-to-face interactions, and this is likely to result in "community networks" or "virtual extensions" when CMC is adopted. Even transnational networks seem to take the form of "virtual extensions" rather than "virtual communities." All in all, the most distinctive contribution of CMC to social movements still seems to be instrumental rather than symbolic. Existing bonds and solidarities are likely to result in more effective mobilisation attempts than it was the case before the diffusion of CMC; it is more disputable, though, where CMC may create brand new social ties where there were none.

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