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Networking Technologies for Collective Action: Two Opposing Models of Activism

Abstract: The use of new communication technologies has become indispensable for campaigning groups. Facilitating coordination with limited resources, the internet has allowed activist networks to grow organically, easing the diffusion of information and the search for new partners. It has also offered a space where citizens can discuss and develop relationships of trust and solidarity that span geographical boundaries. The internet has thus helped lightweight structures to wage campaigns and organize transnational protests with increasing frequency and unparalleled numbers of participants. In that respect, the internet is thought to favour a more horizontal and decentralized model of organizing that mirrors its own structure. This paper will test this hypothesis by examining the websites of two campaigning groups with different goals, strategies and cultures of citizenship: Avaaz.org – an organization aiming to connect people across world in order to make their voices heard in international decision-making – and openesf.net – the online platform of the European Social Forum, one of the main events organized by the Global Justice Movement in Europe. It will show how these differences are translated in the features and design of the groups' websites and the roles that they prescribe for their users. Ultimately, the contrasting uses of the technology reflect two different models of citizen networking for collective action: one stressing the centralized aggregation of citizens' voices; the other emphasizing bottom-up decentralized organizing.

Brief CV: Dr Anastasia Kavada is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI) of the University of Westminster. Her research interests revolve around the role of the internet and social technologies in the establishment of international campaigns and political coalitions and in practices of citizenship and democracy. Her previous research has focused on the Global Justice Movement, exploring the connection between the internet and participatory decision-making, decentralized organizing, and the development of a common identity among movement participants.

Anastasia has taught in a variety of courses in media and communication at the University of Westminster, Middlesex University and Kingston University. She is currently leading a module on Media Technology and Society for the BA Media Studies and supervising undergraduate dissertations.

Publications

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