
The “Internet Generation” and Global Campaigns

“Get involved now in the largest online campaign in history!”¹

This call to action reached me in July of this year in German and English via diverse e-mail lists. What it refers to is a global petition drive to forgive the debts of the world’s poorest states being addressed to the summit meeting of the G-8 states held in Japan this summer. The goal of the drive is to collect tens of millions of signatures. The call to action is tied to the hope that such a campaign will actually have an effect. According to the campaign’s homepage: “They won’t stop collecting on these debts owed by the world’s poorest people until massive, public and international pressure is brought to bear on them. This website will show you how to do just that.” This sort of thing has been foreseen by the power elites, who have responded by developing conflict scenarios designed for a type of warfare waged against a list of potential “enemies” include non-government organizations like the New Social Movements (NSMs). In contrast to information warfare that is generally defined as being limited to state-level combatants and armed forces, “Internet warfare”—the little brother of Infowar, so to speak—can also be waged on the level of individual and transnational protagonists and lobbying groups, according to semi-official military think tanks.²

The NSMs have learned the lessons of globalization as quickly as, if not quicker than, the military establishment. Global campaigns have become a component of media reality.

The latest “Internet Domain Survey” released in January 2000 indicated that there are about 72 million hosts and, on this basis, an estimated 200 million Internet users. This is the potential political “mobilization market” of the NSMs in the Internet.

Austria—a relatively minor player on the international stage—is not the only country in which the possibilities of political agitation and mobilization opened up by the new information and communication technologies have become the target of polemics by government officials. In February of this year, the Austrian chancellor, in a completely erroneous assessment of conditions actually prevailing in the Internet, indiscriminately labeled its users as a “generation”—evidently under the assumption that those elements using the Web to give vent to their rage in opposition to and to the detriment of the present Austrian government were solely rebellious and immature adolescents. During the Portuguese presidency of the EU, initiatives were launched that were designed to accelerate the expansion of Internet services and Internet-related jobs in Europe (training and e-commerce) and cast a telegenic spotlight on heads of state and government in employing Internet applications. Nevertheless, it is highly doubtful that heads of state and government, either of the EU or of any of the other major players in international politics, have a thoroughly grounded, personal understanding of how the Internet functions.

Indeed, it is doubtlessly correct to assume that the PR people on their staff possess this understanding. And this raises a question of tremendous significance for media theory and media policy: what consequences do campaigns such as the ones conducted by the NSMs actually have? Due to the growing concentration of media companies and their uninterrupted series of acquisitions of IT and content providers,³ more and more content is being concentrated in fewer and fewer Web portals, the upshot of which has been an overlapping and interweaving of news agencies and the entertainment industry.

Examples, Precedents, Future Scenarios

“ICANN will become a ‘World Trade Organization in cyberspace,’”⁴ according to the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), a worldwide umbrella organization of non-profit Internet service providers that presumes to be a communication platform representing several thousand NGOs active on a regional and global level.⁵ “The APC is a global federation of 24 non-profit Internet providers serving over 50,000 NGOs in 133 countries. Since 1990, APC has been supporting people and organisations worldwide, working together online for social, environmental and economic justice. Our network of members and partners spans the globe, with significant presence in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.”⁶

The APC networks constitute for the most part a closed community of users, which, however, also route their content via open Internet mailing lists. With the introduction of highly accessible and user-friendly list-server-like applications such as listbot (<http://www.listbot.com/>) and egroups (<http://www.egroups.com/>), free or extremely reasonably priced options for the distribution of information and calls to action have been made available to the general public. Now, it is no longer even necessary to have the capability—which is in any case already very widespread—to design an individual homepage. Lists such as the ones mentioned above take over the desired dissemination function by means of Push technology. Browsing through the directories of these two services, one comes across not only the APC networks, but also practically the entire spectrum of NSMs, from consumer groups, to ecology, civil rights and human rights organizations, and all the way to the “Anti-Globalization Movement” that came into existence last year and is actually nothing more than an umbrella organization amalgamating the content of all these individual political fields and focusing their efforts onto a single, concretely defined object of political action, and which invariably reaches its “summit” in one event—usually a summit meeting of international political leaders. This process of coalition formation can be seen very clearly by analyzing texts that were produced in conjunction with the WTO summit in Seattle, whereby the attempt was made by the NSMs to consolidate within the context of a single argument previously separate lines of thinking and approaches to action, such as the critique of the ongoing globalization of the arms industry, atomic weapons, and the dire economic straits of the Third World.⁷

Aside from the debt-relief campaign, it has probably been the Anti-Globalization Movement that has achieved the highest profile in the prevailing media reality, which continues to be dominated by TV and the print media. The WTO summit in Seattle in December of last year was the highpoint of this campaign. Mobilization efforts are already underway for the follow-up event in November 2000 in Paris. And what is remarkable about this are the organizers’ own estimates of the effects of their actions; according to statements they have released, they expect to attain real political power and to have an impact on how these issues are resolved: “The Seattle summit a year ago was a turning point and a springboard. A turning point, because it revealed a new capacity at a global level to oppose a process that many considered unstoppable. A springboard, because it enables us to set other dynamics in motion. Headed together down this road, in the diversity of our beliefs and mobilisations, we are motivated by the importance of the necessary work: inventing alternatives to the current, neoliberal form of globalisation and translating these alternatives into concrete proposals. Our task is an urgent one. The commodification of every area of life, in every nook and cranny of the planet, is leading to devastation that we cannot accept. (...) we are taking an initiative to invite all the discontented, indignant, even

rebellious people in the world who are looking for other possibilities for human development ...”⁸

Now, the question of what realpolitische power to determine the outcome of events has actually accrued to these globalized NGOs as a result of the use of IT is easy to answer with guesses and suppositions, but it is extraordinarily difficult to empirically confirm these theories. In the case of the WTO summit in Seattle, on one hand, the “demonstration culture” practiced on-site and the major media presence brought about a technical disruption of the summit meeting; on the other hand, it also led the US administration to adopt—or at least pay lip service to—several of the positions of the summit opponents. The WTO could, in any case, achieve no results in Seattle, and the so-called “millennium round” was postponed to this year.

The way such campaigns work has a lot to do with a media reality divided up along national lines, and the reciprocal relationship between the components of this media landscape and the respective national political systems. Without being able to go into all the various nuances here, I will briefly run down a range of phenomena that are particularly revealing of key aspects and call for in-depth analysis. Let’s imagine a two-dimensional representation—one axis measuring the degree of freedom of a political system (defined as the real freedom to voice opinions and criticism of political conditions prevailing at the moment), and the other axis somehow quantifying an individual’s operational possibility to access sources of information such as the Internet that are unregulated or impossible to regulate. The leaders are certainly the US and the OECD states. It is well known that freedom of speech in the US is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, the upshot of which is that even content like Neo-Nazi propaganda does not have to be removed from the Internet by US providers—a freedom which is sharply criticized by many Europeans. As the most recent Internet Domain Survey of January 2000 clearly shows, the percentage the population with Internet access is disproportionately higher in the Western industrialized states than in the rest of the world. Particularly in the US, there has emerged a phenomenon that is frequently referred to as “media democracy.” The overwhelming majority of the public is highly apolitical, whereas the political parties themselves are not extremely hierarchical and are not powerful machines with their own sets of interests. They are, to a much greater extent, susceptible to the influence of media campaigns. These fundamental circumstances enable highly motivated, professionally organized groups to wield massive political influence, and this is even further intensified by the financial dependence of individual elected representatives on contributions to finance their election campaigns in this majority-rule system. As a result of this process of “learning to live with NGOs”⁹ that has been observable at least in the US political system since the mid-’90s, it is evident that the power of NGOs to have an impact on the political process can be enormous, and this has also been demonstrated by successful global campaigns:

- The campaign for the outlawing and anathematization of landmines, which ultimately led to an international treaty that the US—however halfheartedly—ultimately signed.
- The campaign opposing the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI).¹⁰
- The campaign to establish an international court for (war) crimes against humanity, which the US, however, has massively opposed up to now.

Other campaigns have not been as successful, but nevertheless exert considerable pressure on political decisions and public opinion. One example is the Abolition 2000 campaign that was founded in the mid-’90s as a worldwide platform to bring about the elimination of all atomic weapons by the year 2000. Indeed, this objective has not been achieved, but almost 2,000 organizations all over the world are supporting this cam-

paigned to this very day. It succeeded in having expert reports produced at the highest diplomatic levels, such as the Butler Report that was sponsored by the Australian government and served as the basis of a verdict by the International Court in The Hague.

Conclusions

The globalization of campaigns was first made possible by computer technology and especially the Internet. What, on one hand, is perceived as a threat resulting from globalization is, on the other hand, a chance to have an impact on political decision-making “from below,” from beyond boundaries, and from outside traditional political power elites. Along with this development, international and transnational organizations working in collaboration with NGOs have taken on ever-growing significance. A positively paradigmatic aspect of this is the coalition formation involving NGO lobbies and members of the UN General Assembly, where there is almost always a majority in opposition to the singular interests of the industrialized First World, or rather the lobbies representing their economic interests and armaments industries.

Furthermore, as the campaign against the MAI has most clearly shown, the Internet offers the opportunity to end once and for all the 19th-century style of politics based on the confidential maneuverings of cabinet ministers. The draft of the MAI, classified as top secret, was leaked to the public and immediately made available on the Internet. Numerous governments then began to be confronted by critical questions being posed in their own elective assemblies, and withdrew their support for the MAI. And it is no different with the publication of documents leaked from the military establishment and intelligence agencies. Once information escapes the clutches of these institutions, there is no way to prevent the public from getting their hands on it. There are even certain websites that specialize in publishing such documents, and there is nothing that national attempts to regulate such content in the Internet can do to change this.¹¹ Thus, globalization has also given rise to opportunities to have some input into the political process “from below,” particularly for opposition movements in less-developed democracies.

1 <http://212.78.70.10/index1.html>

2 On the subject of the inclusion of NGOs in security policy threat scenarios, see: Arquilla, John; Ronfeldt, David: *The Advent of Netwar*. In: Arquilla, John Ronfeldt, David (Eds.): *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*, Santa Monica 1997. 275–293. On the relevance of these scenarios, see: Schöfbänker, Georg (1998): “From PLATO to NATO—Epistemology, Knowledge and Fantasies of Cyber- and Information War. In Search of New Threats, Threads and Cognitive Patterns after the End of the Cold War.” In: Stocker, Gerfried; Schöpf, Christine (Eds.): *Infowar*, Springer Verlag, Vienna, New York, 101–118.

3 Cf Hachmeister, Lutz; Rager Günter (2000): *Wer beherrscht die Medien? Die 50 größten Medienkonzerne der Welt. Jahrbuch 2000*. Beck'sche Reihe. Munich.

4 <http://www.apc.org/english/rights/governance/index.htm>

5 <http://www.apc.org/english/about/members/index.htm>

6 <http://www.apc.org/english/about/org/index.htm>

7 See, for example: George, Susan; Ritchie, Mark; Slater, Alice; Staples, Steven (1999): *The WTO and the Global War System*. Source: http://www.indg.org/wto_proceedings.pdf

8 Call to action by the “Int'l Network on Disarmament and Globalization”: Building a World of Citizens. One Year after Seattle International Gathering in Paris. E-mail disseminated on July 4, 2000.

9 Simmons, P.J. (1998): Learning to Live with NGOs. In: *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1998, No. 122, 82–96.

10 Kobrin, Stephen J. (1998): The MAI and the Clash of Globalization. In: *Foreign Policy*, Fall 1998, No. 122, 97–109.

11 Cf: <http://cryptome.org/>