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Mediating Political Action: Internet related Beliefs and Frustrations amongst International Solidarity Campaigns in Britain

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Abstract

The terrain of media activism today has become an internet connected one; one that is primarily constructed through online networks or platforms; one that is gradually transforming the way in which political action is imagined, experienced and organised. The following article explores the effects of internet related beliefs and frustrations on contemporary forms of political action. Drawing from the ethnographic context of international solidarity campaigns and the trade unions in Britain, the paper argues that activists' relationship to internet technologies is a complex one, which is embedded in a double tension of empowerment and frustration. It is by ethnographically exploring this tension, the paper contends, that scholars can gain important insights on the ongoing social conflicts and negotiations created by the techno-historical transformations of the last fifteen years.

Keywords

social movements, internet technologies, alternative media, political activism, ethnographic imagination



Resum

El terreny de l'activisme en els mitjans de comunicació avui s'associa a internet; s'ha construït sobretot per mitjà de xarxes o plataformes en línia i, a poc a poc, va transformant la manera d'imaginar, experimentar i organitzar l'acció política. Aquest article explora els efectes que tenen les creences i frustracions relacionades amb internet sobre les formes contemporànies d'acció política. Partint del context etnogràfic en què se situen les campanyes de solidaritat internacional i els sindicats britànics, el treball proposa que la relació que mantenen els activistes amb les tecnologies d'internet és complexa i s'insereix en una doble tensió entre l'apoderament i la frustració. Tal com sosté l'article, és mitjançant una exploració etnogràfica d'aquesta tensió que els especialistes poden arribar a entendre més bé els conflictes permanents i les negociacions socials creats arran de les transformacions tecnològico-històriques dels últims quinze anys.

Paraules clau

moviments socials, tecnologies d'internet, mitjans alternatius, activisme polític, imaginació etnogràfica

Introduction: Context of the Research and the Quest of Ethnographic Thickness

The Cuba Solidarity Campaign – a British organisation embedded in the trade union movement and involved since 1984 in the publication of a glossy magazine called *CubaSí* – was the central site of this research. The organisation, previously known as British-Cuba Resource Centre, was born in 1978 out of a grassroots movement of individuals who were interested in Cuba's socialist achievements. In 1992 the group changed its name into Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC), and by binding economic networks with the major trade unions in Britain, it largely increased its membership size and political influence. Consisting of 4,000 individual members, 450 trade union branch affiliates, 28 local groups on national territory and two sister organisations in Northern Ireland and Scotland, CSC is today the leading solidarity organisation in Britain with a focus on Cuba and Latin America.

The headquarters of CSC are based in a small office in North London. However, the reality of the organisation develops on a variety of networked levels and is embedded in a social world of great interest. This is the world that is composed by all those multilayered social relations that bring together trade unions, campaigning organisations, the Labour Party, the Communist Party, the *Morning Star Daily* and numerous other factions, which are commonly identified as British Left. It is a world that is a profoundly British, white, middle aged, middle class reality, where people have fought against the Thatcher government and have seen the rise of New Labour "hoping and praying that what Tony Blair was doing was just talk to get the conservatives out of power".

However, as it emerged from this research, this is also a world that has been shaken by disbelief before the policies and actions of Tony Blair's Government, and is today deeply affected by a profound sense of disillusion in British politics. This sense of disillusion is counteracted by practices of international solidarity and identification with Latin America. The people involved in this social

world believe that Latin American countries represent an example, an alternative reality – based on collectivism, revolutionary politics and political participation – that highlights the contradictions of the political system in Britain. In order to persuade the British public that countries such as Cuba or Venezuela represent a viable alternative in the current neo-liberal global economy, and to counteract the negative representations of these countries present in corporate media, the organisations that define this social world have relied on the production of their own *alternative media* forms, long before the advent of the internet.

In media studies, alternative media are broadly understood as small scale media, which are linked to the realities of social movements (Downing, 2001), defined by horizontal communication, participatory practices (Atton, 2002) and counter-hegemonic content (Downmunt, 2007). In the last decades, due to their proliferation caused by internet technologies, there has been a growing attention towards these newly empowered media forms (Meikle, 2002). However – although insightful – analyses of alternative media in media studies (Downing, 1998; Atton, 2002; Curran *et al.*, 2003; Waltz, 2005; Coyer *et al.*, 2007) are marked by a certain degree of "thinness". They are thin on the internal politics of the groups involved in alternative media production; thin on the cultural richness of these groups, on the intentions, desires, fears and projects of the people involved (Ortner, 1995, p.190).

This research project brings Media Studies and Anthropology together, and aims to offer a thick description of the frustrations, desires, projects and feelings of the people who engage in the everyday mediation of political action. This theoretical and methodological approach is especially important at a time in which the advent of the internet has deeply transformed activists' relationship to media activism (Manning, 1998; Meikle, 2002). As this paper will show, the relatively long history and media involvement makes the Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC) and its social world a rich and insightful site of research; a site where the impact of contemporary technological developments can be analysed by looking at people's personal histories, and political understandings.



Internet Technologies and Political Action: A Complex Relation of Empowerment and Frustration

When in 1996-1997 the Cuba Solidarity Campaign launched its first website, enthusiasm and expectation towards the “world-wide” potential of new technologies was prevalent within the organisation. In the autumn 1996 *CubaSí* issue – for instance – *immediacy*, *efficiency* and *world-wide* direct online action were key words used in the articles to highlight the advantages the net would bring to their cause. Following the launch of the website, mediated platforms have multiplied within the organisation, and today – a part from distributing 5,000/6,000 printed magazines – CSC also relies on an online newsletter, a Facebook group, mailing-lists, message boards and a YouTube account. Testimonies collected within CSC document the way in which the implementation of online technologies has been experienced by the people involved. Overall, activists believe in the opportunities offered by the internet, contend that new technologies have empowered their networking abilities and facilitated their capability to “get their message across” to institutions and governments.

The beliefs in the possibilities brought about by internet technologies have redefined activists’ political priorities and strategies. People within CSC – today – prioritise media action over other more traditional forms of political solidarity, such as demonstrations or sending aid material. Therefore, by enhancing people’s confidence in their own networking and media strategies, internet technologies seem to have “empowered” media action and amplified the emphasis on the importance of strategies centred upon media technologies. This argument fits well with first observations on the relationship between internet technologies and political action found in the literature on new social movements at the end of the nineties. At the time, scholars argued that new information and communication technologies were becoming a privileged terrain for social and political struggles across the world, because they were enhancing people’s networking strategies and enabled political minorities to transmit their messages on a global scale (Melucci, 1996; Castells, 1997; Ribeiro, 1998; Slater, 1998; Diani *et al.* 2002).

As scholars anticipated – in the last decade – the beliefs in the possibilities of the internet have redefined the terrain of political action. However, this social process is giving rise to a series of questions, contradictions and conflicts amongst the people involved. This is better expressed in the following conversation between Sian (a researcher for AMICUS and member of both Cuba Solidarity Campaign and the Venezuela Information Centre) and Matt, her boyfriend (full-time employee at VIC and member of CSC), both in their mid-twenties.

S: I think it is noticeable in the last years, amongst the different campaigns and the trade unions, things have changed. Today people think that having a Facebook group is a level of political activity and they concentrate on online media action a lot. But then things are deteriorating. Members start to think that merely joining a Facebook group shows that you are committed. But actually it doesn’t mean anything... it doesn’t change things.

M: You are right, but I think it’s also useful for networking and doing counter-information...

S: I mean, it’s useful in terms of advertising and promoting what we do. But you also want lobbying, you want demonstrations, you want protests. Facebook, like other online spaces, is useful in terms of promoting these activities, but cannot be perceived as a substitute. But that’s what’s happening now...

As it emerges from the above conversation, activists’ relationship to the internet is an ambivalent one, which is defined by both a recognition of the opportunities they have been granted and a feeling of frustration for the “lost promises” of the web. To theoretically conceptualise this ambivalence, we must trace the history of the World Wide Web, and following Castells we need to understand that the internet is not just a technology, but a cultural construct that is constructed upon ideological discourses of “freedom” and “openness” (2001, p. 33). Castells (2001) noticed that – as a cultural construction – the internet is an ambivalent one which offers as many opportunities as challenges. Whose freedom are we talking about? How are we to understand the contradictions between the democratic potential of new technologies and the commercial one? (Castells, 2001, p. 275).

In this framework, therefore, activists’ ambivalent relationship with internet technologies is not surprising. Indeed, ambivalence is always present within ideological constructions especially when they influence everyday practices and dynamics. Real life experiences always clash with ideal understandings. Within the literature of social movements or that of the alternative media, however, there is little exploration of the challenges and frustrations people encountered in the everyday use of internet technologies for political action. When there is (Atton, 2004; Meikle, 2002), it is not ethnographic. But what are the challenges, the fears and frustrations embedded in activists’ relationship to internet technologies? If the internet related beliefs have redefined the terrain for political action, what are the effects of internet-related anxieties?

In addressing the above questions my research explored different forms of internet related anxieties and their impacts on people’s understanding of political and media activism. In particular, I looked at how internet-related anxieties and frustrations are challenging people’s understanding of the effectiveness of their online media action and transforming their relationship towards printed media. Here, however, there is only space for a short reflection on one internet-related anxiety, namely the fear of lack of control over the messages produced.



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Within the context of international solidarity campaigns in Britain, the net is seen as a space where – thanks to Goggle – the messages produced by activists are easily tracked, decontextualised and appropriated by others. The anxiety stemming from the lack of control over the messages produced is a strong one and is deeply affecting people's relationship to alternative media production in counter-progressive ways. Ten years ago the *CubaSí* magazine, represented a "collective space for debate, where members contributed freely and discussed controversial topics concerning the island". This characteristic relates well to Downing's (2001) or Atton's (2002) definition of radical and alternative media, as being based on participatory practices and horizontal communication. In the last ten years, however, alternative media production within CSC has changed dramatically and has undergone an "ideological" turn. Today, the campaign's national office has reduced people's participation in the production of the magazine and other media forms. Furthermore, editors and contributors concentrate merely on the dissemination of "uncritical and positive news" about Cuba.

The "ideological turn" and focus on positive news is giving rise to discontent amongst members and local group leaders, who at times criticize *CubaSí* for being too ideological. Despite discontent, however, people seem to understand why the national office needs to focus on such strategies and justify the "ideological turn" by referring to the internet-related anxiety of lack of control over the message produced. In fact, in contrast to the past, today CSC's magazine is interconnected to various online platforms, in a process of news production for which all media texts enter the online domain. In this context, debate is no longer possible, because – as the communication officer of CSC suggested – any critical stance can be appropriated by people of other media organisations who would use CSC's criticism for their own agendas and claim that "even the Cuba Solidarity Campaign says that...".

The understanding of the "ideological turn" in alternative media production within the larger framework of internet-related anxieties raises important questions on a paradox embedded in the relationship between activists and internet technologies. Indeed, it seems interesting that the "technology of freedom and openness" (Castells, 2001) is actually provoking counter-progressive processes that affect the internal politics of the people involved. As this paper has shown, the pervasive use of the internet is affecting people's understanding of what they do and the internal politics of groups. By highlighting these complexities, anthropologists can challenge cultural constructed understandings that see the internet merely as an empowering tool for political activists.

Conclusion

The possibilities and beliefs attached to the structure of the World Wide Web have deeply affected the way in which people understand political action and opposition. By improving the possibility of networking and "getting the message across", internet technologies have empowered activists' understanding of media action and have transformed this into a privileged mode of oppositional politics. Far from perceiving the internet as an unproblematic and empowering force for social change, however, activists' relationship to new technologies is defined by everyday frustrations, anxieties and questions on what media action really means.

As this paper has shown, the relationship between activists and internet technologies is a complex and ambivalent one, which is deeply transforming people's understanding of political action and media activism. To consider these complexities is of central importance for anthropologists. Indeed, as McLagan has argued, "computer-mediated political struggle is being negotiated piece by piece from the people involved and a discourse that allows us to critically address the complexities and implications of this form of political action is a major priority of our time" (McLagan, 1999, p. 187).

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Veronica Barassi is PhD candidate, working jointly with the Anthropology and the Media Departments at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Her research project is funded by the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) and looks at how alternative media are used by campaigning organizations and trade unions in Britain as powerful tools for self-definition and political action. As internet technologies have permeated the everyday levels of political activism, the aim of her research is to provide an original and cross-disciplinary reflection on the changing relation between alternative media, imagination and political action.

Veronica was part of the organizing committee of the Mending the Gaps: Rethinking on Media Theory and Practice Symposium, held at SOAS in May 2008. She was also a member of the executive committee of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network and is currently the only student representative of the Media Studies Subject Centre of the Art, Design and Media - Higher Education Academy. She worked as a casual research assistant for the Goldsmiths Media Research Program and has recently become a Research Associate of the Institute of Contemporary European Studies (ICES) at the London Business School, Regents College.



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