

Searching the Net: website styles in the Global Justice Movement¹

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Abstract:

Notwithstanding a growing interest on online politics in social research, Internet use for making social movements more democratic received little attention. When social movement organizations (SMOs) create their websites, they often underline the amazing capacity to involve members and sympathizers in organizational processes and internal decision-making. However, website design and management implies many choices among different objects being often in reciprocal tension: stressing organizational identity or opening to the outside; increasing transparency or reserving some sections to members; informing users or mobilizing them; widen the debate to people with different opinions or deepen the discussion in homogeneous groups.

In this article we focus on how Internet potentialities are implemented in the websites of SMOs considering different indicators of democratic quality. The empirical research was developed on 261 websites of Global Justice Movement (GJM) organizations in six different European countries and at the transnational level. Diverse democratic conceptions tend to be mirrored in the websites of SMOs and can be explored empirically focusing on a series of dimensions such as: information provision, identity building, transparency/accountability, mobilization, and intervention on the digital divide. In our analysis we will use environmental characteristics (level of Internet access, GJM features) and organizational characteristics (structural features, territorial level of action, age) to explain different website styles.

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1. *Internet and social movements: An introduction*

“I think that these instruments have been fundamental to determine some changes and to spread a wider or different awareness in the society... these media have also increased the potentiality for struggling. Besides communicating, they allow to disseminate a series of contents difficult to be spread to the overall population. With these means such contents succeeded in reaching far places that in the past were absolutely excluded from this type of communication. These means have also contributed to mainstream communication because official mass media have used and asked for the collaboration of independent media” (activist of the social centre Leoncavallo, Milan).

The quotation above briefly synthesizes how activists of social movements perceive the contribution of the Internet for collective action.

For many years, the debate on Internet and politics has been mainly focused on an abstract level, with scarce references to empirical data. First studies on Internet and politics referred mainly to the political parties on the Net and to their strategies of communication via the Internet during electoral campaigns. The main results of these studies point at the low interactivity of websites of political parties (Gibson and Ward 1998; Margolis, Resnick and Wolfe 1999; Cuhna, Martin, Newell and Ramiro 2003; Gibson, Nixon and Ward 2003) and institutions (Coleman, Taylor and Van de Donk 1999). According to these analyses, the Internet is not used to increase interactivity in party communication with voters, activists and citizens. Moreover, when interactivity occurs, it is controlled by the organizations rather than the citizens. Websites seemed instruments of propaganda more than tools for communication or exchange of ideas. In this sense, the way Internet is used by political parties seems not to differ significantly from other media technologies.

However, the choice of the research object could in some way have biased the results. As Bennett (2003a) claims, “much of the attention to the Internet has been directed at the places where the least significant change is likely to occur: the realm of conventional politics.” In fact, he argues, established organizations are more likely to adapt new technologies to their existing missions and agendas than to be transformed by the Internet. Hence, the focus has to be moved towards loose networks and unconventional forms of politics. In this environment, social science research has indeed singled out a more innovative and dynamic use of the Internet (for instance, on NGOs’ websites in Eastern Europe, see Vedres, Brustz and Stark 2005). Indeed, even some political parties seem to have been able to fulfil Internet potentialities, with relevant effects on their activities (see Kies 2005 on the Radical Party in Italy).

This debate has been recently followed by a new interest for empirical research on the relationship between Internet and social movements. Attention to online mobilization developed together with the symbolic relevance of the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, one of the first actors who has succeeded in exploiting effectively the Internet introducing in the collective imaginary a region of the globe that was until then ignored and a protest campaign that the traditional mass-media had neglected (Olesen 2005). The Internet has been said to provide social movements with a cheap and fast means of communication beyond borders which simplify mobilization and favor the adoption of very flexible and loose organizational structures. As Bennett (2003b) puts it: the Internet “becomes an organization force shaping both the relation among organizations and in some cases, the organizations themselves”. The Internet facilitates internal and external communication, allowing sending contemporarily identical copies of the same message to

hundreds of addresses, breaking temporal and spatial barriers. The networked organizational structure of contemporary social movements crossing national borders is also facilitated by the Internet, which allows "to transform an aggregate of individuals with similar problems [and interests], but geographically and/or socially far, in a densely connected and integrated population, resolving one of the fundamental problems of mobilization" (Diani 2000: 32). Also organizational structures are affected by the Internet since, as Smith writes, "the advancement of communication and transportation technologies has made more decentralized organizational structures viable" (1997: 58).

Even in the field of social movement studies, some authors have however presented a pessimistic view on the participatory and deliberating potential of the Internet underlying a limited offer of interactive channels but also a low use of these applications when offered (Rucht 2004: 80). Indeed, the Internet offers new opportunities to resource-poor actors but also creates new challenges for collective action (Mosca 2007). Apparently, not only conventional political actors but also unconventional ones would face problems in fulfilling the democratic potential of the Internet.

The democratic functions of the Internet are often explicitly recognized and claimed by social movement activists and organizations when they state for example that a mailing-list is like a "permanent assembly" because interactive applications give them the possibility to go on and on with discussions. Nevertheless, the use of the Internet as a medium to make Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) more democratic has been poorly investigated. In what follows, we shall indeed address the issue of the degree in which the Internet potentials are fulfilled in SMOs' websites on such dimensions as provision of information, identity building, external accountability, mobilization and reduction of users' inequalities in accessing and using this medium (digital divide).

Beside analysing some main characteristics of SMOs websites, and so their potential to improve democratic communication in the movement, we shall also discuss possible explanations for the internal differences. Technological explanations have been frequently adopted when explaining the effects of technological innovation. The comparison between television and Internet often refers to the technological opportunities and constraints offered by the two media. Parallely, technological skills have been quoted in order to explain the quality of websites, and an improvement in the websites of the political organizations has been explained by the contracting out of websites' design and management to professional webmasters. Recent research on websites has, however, singled out the presence of different models that adapt technology to the organizational styles and strategies (Vedres, Bruzts and Stark 2005).

In what follows we will present the main methodological choices of our empirical research, presenting the main dimensions selected for our study (§2). After a description of different democratic styles on the web (§3), we will propose an interpretation of the main findings presented in the previous paragraphs, trying to assess the influence of a series of (independent) variables on the main democratic dimensions (§4). We will consider if and how environmental and organizational characteristics can help in explaining different results along the analyzed dimensions.

2. Our empirical research: the main choices

In this article, we present the results of a cross-national quantitative analysis of websites of organizations of the Global Justice Movement (GJM) in six European countries (Italy,

France, Spain, Germany, Switzerland and Great Britain) as well as at the transnational level. In order to assess the democratic potential of the Internet for social movements, we decided to focus on the websites of the most relevant (not the largest, but the most representative) SMOs involved in the GJM. Lists of organizations which signed calls for action of social forums (at the national, at the European and at the global level) and other important movement events were collected and used in order to single out the groups belonging to the “core” of the GJM’s networks. A common sampling strategy was agreed upon in order to collect comparable data, covering SMOs focusing upon different issues (environment, peace, women’s rights, labour issues, solidarity, homosexual rights, migrant and human rights, etc.). Moreover, different kinds of media websites close to the GJM were also selected (periodical magazines, radios, newspapers, and networks of independent communication). Besides, where present, also websites of local social forums were included in the sample. Finally, groups critical of the social forum process were included when symbolically influent for their impact upon the activists’ debate on democracy.

The analysis of websites of GJM’s organizations was carried out using a structured codebook.² The main objective of the codebook was to collect information on characteristics of websites that might affect the extent to which online organizations fulfil the democratic potential of the Internet. In order to have a reliable instrument for websites coding, the codebook was tested several times by all coders. Two reliability tests were carried out on two different websites each. After the second test, we intervened in particular upon variables that had not worked well (scores of intercoders’ reliability below 50%). Variables that had not worked since they were interpreted differently by different coders were eliminated and only when possible replaced with new ones. Besides, we decided to reduce the possible bias in the coding process (the variables used for the coding were in many cases dummies), asking the coders to record if a series of information or applications were present or not on the analyzed website. To make the coding process more reliable, we instructed the coders to follow some general rules, such as: a) limiting some searches to specific parts (i.e. the homepage) or sections of the website; b) using the internal search engine (when present) or an equivalent searching function of Google that allows to search for a specific information limiting the search to a single website; c) following the operational definitions provided in the glossary that was inserted at the beginning of the codebook.

In order to complement the quantitative coding with additional information, we asked the coders to record some webpages (statistics, website map, statute, links page, etc.) and to add a final note about peculiarities of the website with a particular emphasis on symbols, discourses, actions and coordination to whom the organizations belong to (and how do they make this affiliation public).

The final codebook was structured around the following dimensions that we considered as relevant for a democratic use of the Internet: a) *general information provision*. This dimension included variables aimed at estimating the information dissemination and analyzing how information on the website is organized (information usability); b) *identity building*. We have coded if an organization uses its website for publishing information on its identity and its history but also considered instruments for *multilateral interactivity* (Rommele 2003) that offer arenas for online debates; c)

² The codebook can be downloaded at: http://demos.iue.it/PDFfiles/Instruments/wp2codebook_final.pdf.

transparency. A set of variables in our codebook aimed at measuring the extent to which the Internet is used by an organization to publish information that makes it more transparent and accountable to the general public. Hence, we coded if a website gives detailed information to users on statute, organizational structure, work agenda, physical existence and reachability, activities, economic situation, number of website users. We also observed if the websites offered information useful to access members of the organization—what is referred to as *bilateral interactivity*, i.e. the willingness of an organization to offer channels of direct communication with citizens (Rommele 2003: 10); d) *mobilization*. A set of variables in our codebook aimed at measuring whether an organization exploits the new chances offered by the Internet to activate its users and to stimulate them to intervene in the political process with various forms of actions both offline (demonstrations, events, etc.) and online (petitions and electronic disturbance actions such as netstrike, mailbombing, etc.); e) *intervention on digital divide*. We analyzed to which extent our selected websites addressed this problem, offering occasions for training and providing a series of different resources to socialize their users to the Internet.

3. Democratic styles on the web

Is online politics of unconventional actors “politics as usual” (Margolis and Reisnick 2000) or is it a different politics where interaction, discussion and even deliberation could take place? Are SMOs able to mobilize supporters through their websites? And do movement organizations’ websites pay attention to democratic problems related to Internet access and digital divide? In what follows we will try to address these issues, analyzing different strategic choices in the construction of websites.

3.1. Websites and the provision of information

“As for the website, it has a specific function: it allows us to keep memory of what we have done and to store the documents we produced working as an archive/database. It would be much more difficult to find these materials and to disseminate them without the website” (activist of the local social forum in Venice).

As the quotation above shows, activists that we have interviewed often underline the importance of websites as a means for constructing a memory of the activity of the organization. A website can fulfill an important function in that it organizes a set of meanings, selects a part of reality, and proposes an interpretation of it. SMOs belonging to the GJM stress, more than most social movements in the past, the importance of building a specialized knowledge (della Porta *et al.* 2005). Helped by the Internet, epistemic communities and advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998) spread information on global issues, highlighting negative consequences of economic globalization and possible alternatives to neoliberalism. They favored the creation of the GJM, providing alternative knowledge on specific issues, access and visibility on the web and linking organizations acting on different parts of the globe. Beyond supranational protest events, long-lasting campaigns make use of the Internet: “weblogs, lists, and networked campaign sites create an epistemic community that makes the campaign a source of knowledge about credible problems, while making the target an example of both problems and solutions” (Bennett 2003b). Within the movement, some organizations

(among which, many of those we analysed) specialize in the diffusion of information via the Internet.

An important dimension considered in models of deliberative democracy is the role of information and informed arguments in decision-making. Since information dissemination can be considered as a basic starting point for a deliberation among equals, the analysis of SMOs websites focused on which type of information is provided online. Overall, most of the analyzed websites present a significant amount of information.

The widely used form of political education consists in publishing articles, papers and dossiers (90%) while bibliographical references are given in 40% of the cases. Interestingly, more than half of the websites (53%) presents conference and seminar materials that allow interested people to deepen their knowledge on specific topics. A news section is present in almost four fifth (78%) of our websites. In order to put our data on SMOs websites in a wider comparative perspective we can recall that Eastern-European NGOs websites offered a news section in a much lower 48% of the cases and information about conferences in only 16% (Vedres, Bruszt and Stark 2005: 154).

An important aspect that affects the quality of information is also the *usability* of a website, that is the possibility for users to find information. The presence of search engines and website maps should help the user to rapidly find what he/she is searching for. It seems that organizations perceive this necessity: almost 60% has a search engine and almost 30% has a website map.

Internet has also been considered as a means of communication enhancing democracy since it reduces the cost of communication and allows people and civil society groups to communicate beyond borders (Zimmermann and Erbe 2002). If we consider the presence of multilingual websites, we find that about one fourth of the websites provides translations of basic information on the group and about one fifth translates the section identifying the group (about one third of Eastern-European NGOs translate at least part of their websites, see Vedres, Bruszt and Stark 2005: 154). Although one could argue that transnational communication is usually done with email and not through websites it seems that, in a globalizing world, national civil society organizations find still difficult to speak to each other cross-border: differences in languages still represents problematic barriers for transnational communication. This result is consistent with other researches focusing on the Europeanization of the public sphere on the Internet (Koopmans and Zimmermann 2003).

3.2. Building Identities through the Internet

“our mailing-list is an enduring assembly... in fact it is not a newsletter directed to the general public but our virtual assembly where the discussion goes on and on, focusing on different issues - both on concrete things to do and organize and on the analysis of the political situation” (activist of the squat “Cantiere Sociale”, Milan).

Websites serve as places for self-presenting to the general public while specific tools like forums and mailing-lists³ favor an ongoing communication and discussion among activists. The websites are then considered by activists as electronic business cards. In

³ It has however to be noted that this interactive tools sometimes are incorporated directly within websites while some other they are not. With our research we could only assess the presence of such tools within SMOs websites but we can not exclude the case that the same organizations place interactive platforms elsewhere in the cyberspace without publicizing them on their websites.

fact, they tell something very important about the identity and the past history of the organization.

Social movement scholars underlined Internet's capacity to generate new identities. If Diani (2000) claims that the Internet's contribution to the collective identities of social movements is mainly in reinforcing existing ones, Freschi (2002) studied how virtual communities can develop an identifying function, creating social networks with internal solidarity and common beliefs, acting online and offline. In fact, "real community can and do take root in Internet-based space" (Gurak and Logie 2003: 43).

A type of information that is generally published on the websites of GJM's organizations concerns indeed the identity and the history of the group itself. In fact, the Internet represents an important opportunity for SMOs to overcome the gatekeeping of traditional media and to present themselves to the general public without external manipulation. Overall, around two thirds of the websites provide an archive of press releases (that is also an important source of information for journalists of traditional media) and an archive of annual reports or a chronology of the history of the organization. Also the old leaflets give us interesting information about the history of the organization: about its actions, its campaigns, its mobilizations, etc. About two fifths of the surveyed organizations archive this type of material and provide documents on past assemblies that are considered fundamental steps in their collective history.

If information on the past history are particularly interesting for people new to an organization, information on the current life of the organization are of primary importance both for neophytes and for older activists. Interesting to note, more than 50% of the analyzed websites has a newsletter that in the large majority of the cases is accessible by all users. On average, less than 25% of websites present the internal work agenda of the group. If an organization is interested in enhancing internal communication with its members, it can provide a members-only section on its website where it offers more contents than to the general public. In fact, about one quarter of the analyzed websites have a specific section restricted to members.

Our previous research on the use SMOs' websites during the mobilization against the G8 in Genoa in 2001 (della Porta and Mosca 2005a; Andretta *et al.* 2002 and 2003) indicates that the Internet provides occasions for a reflexive work. Online forums and mailing-lists favor debates on specific aspects (such as forms of actions, alliances, slogans, etc.) before a protest takes place and, later on, a collective reflection on a demonstration's success and failure among "distant" activists. Before the G8 countersummit in Genoa, online discussion spaces facilitated the emergence of common interpretative schemes among activists and organizations. In particular, the activists of rete Lilliput (nonviolent Italian organizational network; <http://www.retelilliput.it>) made an intense use of the Internet not only to spread information, but also to internally discuss themes of interest (for instance, with a list focusing on the G8 countersummit), through a national, regional and local system of newsletters and mailing-lists. The more radical Disobedients organized a referendum on the web about legitimate forms of action to be used during the protest. This takes us to another question, referring this time to the type of identity facilitated by Internet use. The presence of specific applications like forums, mailing-lists or chat-lines on a website indicates the organization's commitment to multilateral interactivity that is the creation of open spaces for the discussion between different people. Applications for multilateral interactivity are differently spread on the

analyzed websites. About one third of the websites provide an asynchronous space for discussion (forum and/or mailing-list)⁴ while chat-lines are scarcely used (only 3% of the websites) in fact this type of applications are not generally employed for political debates.

If we focus on the offer of other tools for the online participation of website users, we notice that the use of these applications is generally limited. New forms of information management like the open publishing (possibility for all users to publish news, calls, proposals, etc. without any filter) are used in 10% of the cases. A similar percentage concerns the possibility to react to a specific request of comments by the organization. Finally, around 10% of the websites uses survey and questionnaire to collect the opinion of the users on different types of topics.

3.3. Transparency and accountability on the web

“there are also huge challenges as you are bombed with silly things and it can happen that somebody decides to run a website and to dissimulate the presence of a group or a collective behind it but in reality it is just one person behind an Internet address... so it is important to adopt some filters but this does not apply only to the Internet; in fact also with other means of communication you have to select information and use filters” (activist of the online information portal ‘Social Press’, Milan).

After focusing on information provision and identity building, we considered the website as an instrument giving opportunities for the transparent functioning and the accountability of an organization. One of the main critics concerning the Internet refers in fact to the possibility that this mean favours opaque and ambivalent communication, as highlighted by one of our interviewees. However, it has also been stressed that the theoretical endless of information on the Internet provides the opportunity for a better transparency and accountability.

These functions can be measured by the publication of a series of information on the organization itself (organizational structure, statute or equivalent document, reachability, information/contacts of the leader and other identified roles) and its finances. In 80% of the cases the website offers information on the physical existence and reachability of the organization.⁵ In 70% of the cases such information are directly published on the homepage or just one click away from the homepage. More than 85% of the websites published online the statute (or an equivalent document) of their organization. Furthermore, almost two thirds of the websites contain information on the organizational structure of the group.

If information on the structure and on the decision-making rules of the organization are frequent, less so are information on the website itself: only in one forth of the websites we find information about the last updating and only 16% give some kind of indication on users’ access to the website (but statistics are often unclear and very imprecise lacking also of a temporal reference). Probably also because of their low budgets, only 25% of the websites provide information on organization’s finance.

Another set of indicators (usually considered under the label of bilateral interactivity) concerns the presence of contacts of people actively involved in the organizations both with leading roles and with other identified roles. The presence of these contacts indicates

⁴ Similar indicators show that about one fifth of the Eastern European NGOs provide instruments for participation via bulletin board, chat-room and the like (see Vedres, Bruszt and Stark 2005: 154).

⁵ A similar percent was noticed for Eastern European NGOs (see Vedres, Bruszt and Stark 2005: 154).

the willingness of the organization to open up to public scrutiny by creating direct channels of communication with website users. In this sense, the presence of contacts represents a step beyond unidirectional instruments of communication (like a newsletter). Almost 90% of the websites provide a general email of the organization⁶ and 30% of the analyzed websites put it on their homepage. However, the provision of email addresses of other people involved in the organization is not very widespread: only 40% of the websites provide the email of the webmaster; 31% the email of other people/departments within the organization and only 14% the email of the responsible for international relations (this data seems consistent with the one on multilingual audience). Finally, focusing only on the organizations that in their websites declare the presence of a leader, less than half gives some kind of information on the person that perform this role and about one quarter provides leader contacts to the general users.

In order to address the transparency of the organizations we tested the responsiveness of the general information service and of the webmaster using the emails published on the website. The info request was also sent to collect information about the management of websites. Hence, when an email was available we emailed the persons responsible of the information and the webmasters sending them a message with some questions⁷. Overall, the response rate varied from 31% for the request sent to the general email to 45% for the one sent to webmaster emails.⁸

3.4. Mobilization in the web

“The Internet has a pivotal and strategic role for Lilliput, it is part of our strategy of communication and pressure ... We are employing it in a very interesting way to organize online pressure campaigns on national deputies and also on representatives at the local level. We have used the mail-bombing on political representatives and it has given interesting results” (spokesperson of the ecopacifist network rete Lilliput, Rome).

As the quotation above shows, activists are aware that the Internet can be used to organize pressure campaigns and to directly perform acts of dissent. However, the Internet can help in mobilization processes both online and offline.

Research on unconventional political participation (and not only) have stressed that the organization of supranational protest has very high transaction costs —that explains, among other factors, why, although competences increase at the international level, protest remains mainly national, if not local. However, the Internet has substantially reduced the cost of communicating with large number of individuals spread all around the globe. Already for the campaign against land mines, it was observed that “the global web of electronic media, including telecommunications, fax machines, and especially the Internet and the World Wide Web, have played an unprecedented role in facilitating a

⁶ A similar percent (respectively 85% and 87%) was found in the case of Eastern European NGOs (Vedres, Bruszt and Stark 2005: 154) and in the analysis of European parliaments online (Trechsel, Kies, Mendez and Schmitter 2003: 23).

⁷ We asked to the information service how many people manage it, the average number of information requests they receive in a month, the average number of messages they respond to and the time frame of the answers. We asked to the webmaster for the number of volunteers and/or paid staff employed to maintain the website, the average traffic demand, the number of subscribers to newsletter and/or mailing-list/forum, the frequency of updating, the type of software used to realize the website.

⁸ This rate was calculated considering only the websites that published the email of the person responsible of the information and of the webmaster.

global network of concerned supporters around the issue” (Price 1998: 625). There is quite a lot of evidence that "protests are increasingly conceived, planned, implemented and evaluated with the help of the Internet" (O'Brien 1999). In the last few years, Internet has allowed for the organization of very large, transnational demonstrations, that have occurred with a frequency and a numerical consistence unknown before. The Internet facilitates the organization of transnational mobilizations that either occur contemporarily in different countries⁹ or unwind in a unique place with the participation of activists coming from different countries and continents —as in the case of the World Social Forums. Connected rapidly and cheaply in the Net, networks of activists and more and more global organizations have worked together in Seattle, Genoa, Porto Alegre, Florence, Paris, London, etc. For instance, the Internet allowed the organizers of the first European Social Forum (ESF) to consistently lower the costs of mobilization offering to virtual visitors the possibility to collect information on the genesis and objectives of the forum, to access the official program, to consult preparatory and conclusive documents (see della Porta *et al.* 2006). Website users had the possibility to register online to the forum and to book a place (for-free or paying) where to sleep during the days of the ESF. An online forum was created to discuss and make decisions on the official program: anybody had the possibility to propose (and organize, once accepted) a specific workshop.

The Internet has been considered as an instrument for not only more democratic and open forms of communication but also offline and online mobilization. The websites of our sample of SMOs perform this function to very different degrees. More than 60% of the organizations publish online their action calendar.¹⁰ About one third publishes also the action calendar of other organizations belonging to the GJM and provides concrete information (through manuals or links to useful resources) on offline forms of action. The organization of physical meetings for offline forms of action concerns almost one fifth of the analyzed websites (between 16% and 22% organizes workshops and helping desks to socialize people to offline forms of action); information on offline forms of action are present in about one third (36%). As many as two thirds of our websites advertise the participation of their organization in a protest campaign. The action alert --that has the specific purpose of informing and immediately mobilizing members and activists of an organization when a very important political events occurs (i.e. political repression, human rights violation, etc.)-- is not much present in the analyzed websites (we have to consider however that this kind of communication is generally circulated within the mailing-list of different groups).

The Internet is also an instrument of protest being used for *online mobilization* and for the online performance of acts of dissent. This is the case of online petitions, netstrikes and mail-bombings. As some studies shown, many hackers --with their attention to the Internet and online protest-- belong to the GJM, taking up issues such as copyright and right to privacy (Jordan 2002; Freschi 2003).

Computer-mediated communication allowed mounting the transnational campaigns against multinational corporations such as De Beers, Microsoft, Monsanto, Nike, etc. run especially via *online petitions*. Transnational online petitions also denounced specific

⁹ As is the case of the hundreds of demonstrations opposing the war against Iraq on February 15th 2003.

¹⁰ In the case of Eastern European NGOs a lower 42% for the provision of information on meetings and calendar of events was found (Vedres, Bruszt and Stark 2005: 154).

human rights violation and put pressure on national governments against death penalty.¹¹ Thanks to the Internet, these campaigns became more long-lasting, less centrally controlled, more difficult to turn on and off, and changing in term of networks and goals (Bennett 2003b). Another form of online protest is the *netstrike* consisting of a large number of people connecting simultaneously to the same domain at a prearranged time, in order to “jam” a site considered as a symbolic target and to make it impossible for other users to reach it. It proliferated in the past years among radical organizations as a “virtual practice for real conflicts” (according to the association StranoNetwork, quoted in Freschi 2000: 104). A netstrike was for instance promoted against the WTO web site during the protests in Seattle, ideally linking offline and online environments (Jordan 2002). Similar to the netstrike, *mail-bombing* consists of sending emails to a web site or a server until it overloads and gets jammed.

In our websites, online forms of actions are less often promoted than offline ones: the online petition is used by almost 30% of the analyzed websites; 15% of them publish on the website concrete information on online forms of actions. The percentage is even lower if we consider the presence of calls to netstrikes and/or calls to mailbombings while other forms of online mobilizations are much more widespread, although still limited to a minority of websites: almost 18% of websites propose to their users a form of online mobilization like the epostcard.

3.5. *Intervening on the digital divide*

“I think that there is always a problem that concerns technology... the website we had before was much more complex than the present one and it obliged people to have some knowledge of html language. But this is something that selects very much people and so you become a filter and a funnel and all depends on you. This was a strong limitation with whom we had to cope. To create the new website we used French free software that is completely open. We asked to our experts to create a multi-level system of open publishing. External collaborators have a restricted access and can modify only some sections of the website. The advantage is that this new system is very easy and can be used by everybody” (activist of the online portal Social Press, Milan).

As we have seen, the Internet is perceived by social movements’ activists as a great opportunity for informing, building identities, make communication more transparent and mobilizing. However, limits of Internet communication are also recognized. To which extent, the Internet allows for mobilizing different groups of the population, especially the least “technologically educated” is an open question, often discussed in the literature on Internet and protest. If the Internet offers logistic support to social movements, it is however an open question to which extent it has an equalizing effect. As mentioned, the Internet is in fact the specific source of a new form of inequality which has been described by the concept of “digital divide”. Significantly, institutions of global governance recently put in their agenda the issue of digital divide. Our own data on the ESF participants confirm to a certain degree the existence of a digital divide within social movements, but also point at the socializing role to the Internet played by movement organizations (della Porta and Mosca 2005a).

¹¹ See, for example, the campaigns about two Nigerian women, Amina and Safya, sentenced to death for violating *Sharia*, the Islamic law, by having a child outside of marriage; after the decision of the judge the information was spread online an international mobilization finally succeeded in avoiding their execution.

As we already noticed the digital divide is strictly related to the issue of democracy—and especially with the focus on participatory models of democracy—since it concerns both access to the Internet and the skills in using electronic applications. We considered the offer of some electronic resources as indicators of the attention of the organization to the digital divide. However, the organizations we selected for our analysis are not very concerned with this issue. In fact less than the 10% provide laboratories, helping desk and other electronic application to socialize their users to the use of the Internet. Only 5% of these groups offer free email to their users and just 8% hosts webpages or websites.

The presence of a text-only version of the website allows people with slow connection and old hardware to access the contents of a website. This concern is only present in about 5% of the websites. We also looked if an explicit reference to the accessibility issue was made on the homepage of the analyzed website but we found that it was very rarely the case. Hence, if SMOs are quite prone to providing tools to search for information (see paragraph 3.1), little attention is given to the accessibility of such contents.

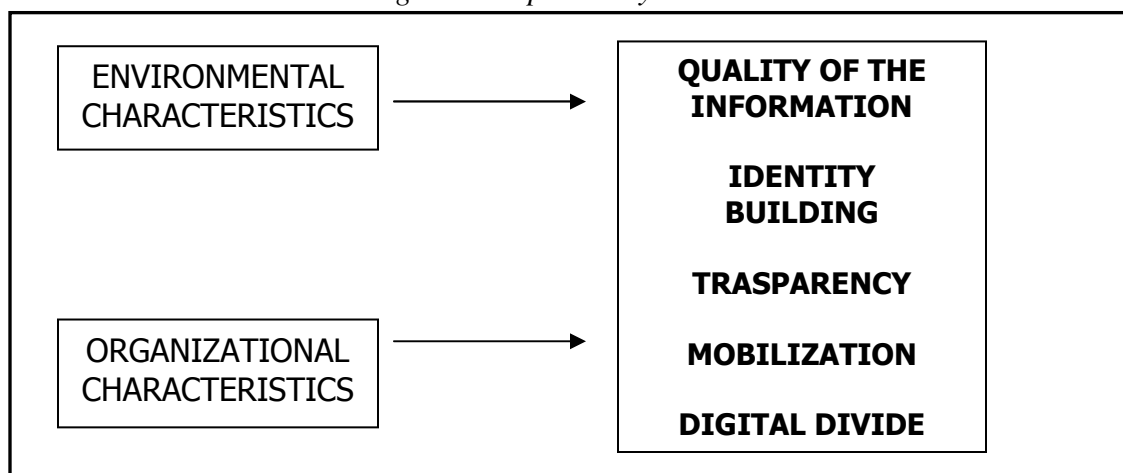
It seems that the issue of digital divide is addressed mainly by a limited number of SMOs specifically engaged on this problem while the other organizations do not consider it as a priority.

4. Environmental characteristics, organizational features and websites' styles: some explanations

How can we explain the different emphasis of the different websites on the different dimensions of democratic communication? Criticizing the technological interpretation of the Internet as able to favor, thanks to its inherent networked logic, a decentralization of power and an empowerment of citizens, most scholars nowadays agree in underlining the role of the agency in shaping the online environment (Oates e Gibson 2006, 3). Relations between technology and its users have to be considered as bi-directional: not only technology has an impact on social relations but social relations shape the use of the Internet as a technology.

Our explanatory model considers environmental dimensions as well as organizational ones (see Fig. 1). That is, we assume that offline characteristics matters in explaining online presence of SMOs. In fact, we consider that studying how SMOs present themselves on the Internet implies taking into account both offline and online environments that cannot be conceived as separate settings (Paccagnella 2002).

Figure 1. Explanatory model



For what it concerns the hypotheses on the influence of the environment, we considered the level of access to the Internet by the population of the different countries selected for the research.¹² We consider in fact that a bigger diffusion of the Internet could explain a different investment on this medium by SMOs in different countries. Whereas the Internet still represents a relative new medium, used by a reduced quota of citizens, it is more likely that SMOs limit their online presence to advertisement, without investing very much on the democratic qualities of their websites.

Besides considering levels of access to the Internet, selected cases have been classified on the bases of the characteristics of the GJM in the respective countries.¹³ We in fact noticed that in the selected countries, the density and format of organizational networks tend to vary generating two different constellations of social movements, corresponding, with some caveats, to Northern and Southern Europe (see della Porta 2006). The two social movement constellations are characterized by different types of network (more integrated in the French, Italian and Spanish case; more polarized in Germany and Switzerland and, to a lesser extent, in the UK); different organizational structures (more horizontal in the first group, more vertical in the second one) and a different orientation towards unconventional collective action (more protest-oriented in the first group, more lobbying-oriented in the second one).

For what it concerns organizational characteristics, we expect that the Internet could favour big organizations instead of little grassroots groups (Pickerill 2003). Organizational attitudes towards the Internet could also vary on the basis of the age of the group: while “newer, resource-poor organizations that tend to reject conventional politics may be defined in important ways by their Internet presence” (Bennett 2003b), established organizations seem to have a conservative approach toward the Internet (Smith 1997). As Tarrow argues “the Internet as a form of movement communication has had a more transformative effect on new movement organizations than on established ones, which continue to rely more on face-to-face communication and on conventional organizational channels of communication” (2003: 31). But we should also consider that the resources available for an organization influence more effective use of the Internet—as some findings on political parties (Ward 2001) and NGOs (Warkentin 2001) seem to point out.

In fact, if it is quite easy and inexpensive to create a website and to let it float in the cyberspace, a well-organized, updated and interactive website demands significant investment of resources.

In order to control for the influence of a series of variables on the democratic dimensions we selected for the analysis, we built five synthetic indexes that summarize the main democratic dimensions presented above. Additive indexes result from the summing up of different normalized indicators (varying from 0 to 1). Indexes were also standardized varying from 0 to 1. First of all, we looked at the correlation of the different indexes of online democracy in order to check if they reinforce each other or not. We

¹² In order to develop the analysis, we created a variable giving to the cases belonging to different countries values varying between 0 (=0%) and 1 (=100%), depending on the percentage of people accessing the Internet (source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm>). In this case, we excluded from the analysis the 30 cases sampled at the transnational level.

¹³ We used a dummy variable giving value 0 to Germany, United Kingdom and Switzerland and value 1 to France, Italy and Spain. We excluded the 30 cases sampled for the transnational level. These explorative analyses are taken from della Porta and Mosca (2006).

found some significant correlations: provision of information is particularly related to mobilization and to identity building, while transparency has only a significant (but low) correlation with information provision, and online and offline mobilization is highly correlated with identity building and intervention on digital divide (see table 1). What we found interesting is that not all the indexes are correlated: this finding seems to confirm that organizations tend to maximize only some potential dimensions of democracy online. This confirms that they choose among different techniques rather than being driven from technology (Vedres *et al.* 2005).

Table 1. Indexes of online democracy (non parametrical correlations, Kendall's Tau-B)

INDEXES	<i>Information provision</i>	<i>Identity building</i>	<i>Transparency</i>	<i>Mobilization</i>	<i>Digital divide</i>
Information provision	--	0.295**	0.187*	0.317**	0.182**
Identity building	0.295**	--	0.147*	0.382**	0.123*
Transparency	0.187**	0.147*	--	n.s.	n.s.
Mobilization	0.317**	0.382**	n.s.	--	0.281**
Intervention on digital divide	0.182**	0.123*	n.s.	0.281**	--
<i>Total (N)</i>	261	261	261	261	261

Legenda: ** = significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed); * = significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed); n.s. = not significant

We have then controlled to which extent the website styles are related with some characteristics of the sampled SMOs. As we can see in table 2, environmental characteristics allow explaining partially democratic online styles of organizations of the GJM. Correlation coefficients show that the group of countries more oriented towards protest and where Internet access is still limited, the Internet is more likely to be used as instrument for spreading information on offline mobilization. In the same countries, the Internet is also used for identity building and information provision. The countries more oriented towards more conventional forms of action and where Internet access is higher tend instead to use more the Internet as an instrument for transparency or accountability.

According to some hypotheses, more formal organizations should be more able to invest resources to improve their online presence. However, we expect less structured groups to devote more attention to identity building and relying more on protest. In order to check these hypotheses we used some indicators concerning organizational characteristics: absence of leadership roles or equivalent roles in charge of coordinating the activities of the organization (present in almost 70% of the groups) that we considered as an indicator of horizontality; fee membership (which we considered as an indication of formalization); the definition of the group as local (almost one fifth of the cases), influencing the territorial scope of the action. We also took into account the date of foundation of the different organizations. The organizational characteristics we considered seem to have similar effects and help explaining in particular transparency, information provision and online mobilization.

Table 2. Online democracy and characteristics of the organization (Kendall's Tau-B)

	INDEPENDENT VARIABLES					
	ENVIRONMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS		ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS			
INDEXES of online democracy DEPENDENT VARIABLES	Internet access	Constellation of the GJM	Horizontality (lack of roles)	Formalization (fee membership)	Local level group	Age of the group
Information provision	0.154**	0.187**	-0.242**	-0.160*	n.s.	0.176**
Identity building	n.s.	0.179**	-0.124*	-0.103*	-0.125*	n.s.
Transparency	-0.187**	-0.234**	0.409**	-0.258**	-0.206**	-0.397**
Offline Mobilization	0.104*	0.172**	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Online Mobilization	n.s.	n.s.	-0.160**	-0.287**	-0.118*	n.s.
Intervention on digital divide	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Total (N)	231	231	261	261	261	261

Legenda: ** = significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed); * = significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed); n.s. = not significant

Source: Demos data quoted in the WP2 integrated report (della Porta e Mosca 2005b).

An interesting result regards the degree of formalization and the territorial level of organizations: both are negatively correlated with the index of transparency. This data could be related to the fact that websites of local organizations are generally less complex, rich and articulated than websites of organizations active at higher territorial levels. More centralized organizations seem to invest more on information provision. Division of roles is associated in fact with more attention towards information production and its diffusion on the Internet. However, newer organizations, that seem to interpret better than the other the innovative potentialities of the Internet, devote more attention to this aspect.

Finally, organizational characteristics do not help in explaining the use of the Internet to intervene on the digital divide and to disseminate information concerning offline mobilizations. Mobilizing online is a characteristic typical of less formal organizations. Those seem to fulfill the more innovative aspects of this medium, exploiting it as a tool to strengthen their mobilization capacity.

5. Between virtual and real: Some conclusions

“Obviously the Internet allows the circulation of more information giving the impression of reaching a great deal of people. Our website is certainly a point of reference for those searching for information on the movement. However, sometimes we think that it could substitute personal relations but it doesn't work: it is necessary to talk and discuss with people. Sometimes we made this mistake... someone thought that these instruments alone can be enough but it is evident that they aren't: they can substitute neither assemblies and physical meetings nor paper and leaflets” (activist of the local social forum in Turin).

In this article we show that the Internet is considered a means playing a fundamental role by activists of social movements. Thanks to the Internet, SMOs can intensify their communication through the dissemination of alternative information online, presenting themselves without filters, distributing tools for offline mobilization and protesting online. It seems that there is evidence for the claim of Manuel Castells according to whom the Internet “fits with the basic features of the kind of social movements emerging in the Information Age (...) To build an historical analogy, the constitution of the labor movement in the industrial era cannot be separated from the

industrial factory as its organizational setting (...) the Internet is not simply a technology: it is a communication media, and it is the material infrastructure of a given organizational form: the network” (2001: 135-6).

However, our research does not allow to conclude that “not only the formation of collective identity is easier due to the Internet's ability to put [together] people of similar grievances in disparate geographical area, but also the diffusion of collective identity is faster and easier” (Park 2002, chapter II: 19). Notwithstanding, the Internet is perceived as an instrument particularly useful to influence internal communication and SMOs seem interested in exploring its innovative potentiality. Our research confirms that, especially in transnational mobilizations, it widens the capacity of action of those groups less gifted of channels to access institutions. In the case of the transnational campaign against landmines it was already observed that “The global web of electronic media, including telecommunications, fax machines, and especially the Internet and the World Wide Web, have played an unprecedented role in facilitating a global network of concerned supporters around the issue” (Price 1998, 625). The role of the Internet seems to have grown together with the number of potential users.

As the above quotation of an activist belonging to a local social forum remind us, however, Computer-Mediated Communication is far to be considered as potentially capable to substitute face-to-face interactions (see also Sculer e Day 2004). As a matter of fact, the Internet neither substitute other types of social relation nor reduces the repertoire of sociability of social movements, that is one of the main elements characterizing this type of actor. It generates instead new opportunities to improve movements communication making it faster (almost in real time), more frequent (keeping always open the channels of communication) and capable to overcome physical barriers.

In this article, we observed that not only activists but also SMOs are able to detect limits and opportunities of Internet communication. Given the different possibilities to employ and use the Internet, environmental and organizational characteristics help to explain, at least in part, the strategic choices operated by SMOs. Technology is used to achieve specific objectives. Our research underlines the role played by actors in the use of new technologies. As Pickerill noted in a research on online environmental activism: “deterministic assumptions are challenged by an awareness that technology is not a discrete artifact which operates externally to impact upon social relations” (2003, 23). Different websites present diverse styles apparently reflecting different models of democracy (and of democratic communication): SMOs more oriented towards more formal and hierarchical democratic models seem to show a more traditional (and instrumental) use of the Net while less formalized groups tend to use more interactive tools (and identity building) available online as well as various forms of computer-mediated protest.

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