Digital Media and Civil Society Networks: National and Transnational Publics

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What do emerging communication technologies mean for our capacity to act collectively in civil societies transformed by globalisation and individualisation? Global problems such as climate change and fair trade that entail increasingly fluid ideological and geographical issue boundaries are engaging what seem to be transnational citizen publics. But issues of democratic legitimacy arise as the structure of late modern civil society shifts from a national to a transnational frame and from membership-centred to individualised citizen engagement. NGO presence in transnational governance (as in the case of the EU-sponsored civil society platforms) may remedy one kind of democratic deficit, but what are these organisation's own credentials as the representatives of publics? Meanwhile, loose grassroots networks are mobilising spectacular large-scale protests, but do they have the staying power to constitute democratically meaningful publics? The core question is: what enables or limits the capacity of civil society networks to engage and mobilise both national and transnational publics, in contrast to simply representing publics without substantial citizen interaction? In particular, what is the capacity of such networks to mobilise increasingly individualised citizens, and how does the relationship to democratic authority (here, the EU) encourage (or discourage) this capacity?

This project focuses on the role of communication in relations between civil society networks and potential publics. Communication is commonly conceived as an intermediate variable in the study of political action, yet its role in ordering action is fundamental to understanding how digital media enable civil society actors such as NGOs, transnational advocacy networks, and citizens seeking more flexible affiliations to reconfigure the contemporary political landscape both on and offline. The project develops a communication perspective on collective action and civil society that sheds light on dilemmas facing networks of advocacy actors seeking to maintain coherent agendas to influence transnational decision-making while attracting followers who are less responsive to conventional organisation-centred collective action frames.

Purpose and aims

The purpose of this project is to analyse the transformation of civil society with respect to the organisation of national and transnational publics by focusing on how digital communication is used to: a) connect various ground level organisations and activities (which are likely to differ across nations), and b) diffuse and sustain common ideas and action that create structure in fluid multi-cause, transnational, and virtual public spaces.

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The project analyses case studies of EU protest events and issue advocacy networks on global issues 2006 – 2015. It focuses on three countries (United Kingdom, Germany and Sweden) and on two issue clusters that exist within and across nations as well as in grassroots and state-sanctioned configurations: one involves trade, development and economic justice issues and the other centres on climate change and environment networks.

The specific aims are:

1. To analyse elementary democratic qualities of digitally networked public spaces in terms of network depth (the degree of citizen engagement) and cohesion (the degree of continuity of communication and action). The network patterns of depth and cohesion are studied according to two dimensions affecting public communication:

a) The organisational modes of engaging publics in social and political activities both on and off line to assess the conditions under which communication technologies enable organisations to engage individualised publics in sustained advocacy efforts with coherent issue agendas and state policy targets.

b) The comparison of mid-level and high-level EU – civil society network relations to assess how different orientations to state power (e.g., contestation vs. incorporation) affect communication with publics and the participation of organisations in larger civil society networks that seek different levels of public engagement.

2. To develop a communication perspective on collective action and civil society, drawing out implications for the theoretical debate on democratic quality in national and related transnational publics.

Survey of the field

The twin processes of globalisation and individualisation are transforming civil society and the way it is theorised. Two trends pose empirical and conceptual challenges: the shift from national to transnational arenas of participation, and the late modern movement away from membership in organisations towards looser and more personalised forms of political action. As problems such as climate change cut across ideological, institutional and geographical boundaries, citizens and organisations are acting across borders to target governments, transnational authorities and corporations. At the same time, citizens shifting away from traditional bases of social solidarity such as parties, unions and other membership organisations and towards more individualised forms of public action are personalising their action and information networks and seeking flexible relations with organisations and causes. Civil society organisations are thus under pressure from above and below to engage both transnational authorities and individualised citizens (Giddens 1991; Castells 1996; Inglehart 1997; Bennett 1998; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Micheletti 2003; Bennett 2005; della Porta 2005; Flanagin et al. 2006; Micheletti & McFarland 2010). A variety of overlapping publics which can loosely be termed 'transnational publics' are emerging in the wake of these shifts, linking diverse civil society networks in transnational action (Guidry et al. 2000; Olesen 2005; Bower 2004; Fossum & Schlesinger 2007). Such publics challenge conceptions of the democratic public centred on a unitary nation state (Fraser 2007; Bohman 2007) as well as those modelled on membership participation, mass audiences and common media consumption

(Bennett 2003; Benkler 2006; Marres 2006).

The touchstones of democratic quality in publics are their normative legitimacy (who participates and on what terms) and political efficacy (the impact on authority and decision-making) (Fraser 2007). This project focuses on the question of legitimacy in two elementary senses: the degree of citizen engagement ('depth') and the degree of continuity in communication and action which underpins both the public's participatory legitimacy and assumptions about its political efficacy ('coherence'). We examine how communication technologies and networking strategies affect these qualities in networked publics. Concerns about depth and coherence are already widely debated with respect to the public sphere qualities of two classic civil society actors, NGOs and the mass media. High-level NGOs and elite mass media are found to represent little more than shallow 'proxy publics' with low citizen engagement (Lang 2010; cf. Erman & Uhlin 2010; Statham & Koopmans 2010; Bennett, Lawrence & Livingston 2007; Bennett 2008). At the same time, there is concern about the fragmentation resulting from loose networks of action and communication facilitated by digital media. Social movement scholars worry that multi-issue networks that are easy to opt in and out of fail to generate the commitment, coherence and persistence of action historically required for civil society actors to achieve policy impact (Tilly 2004), and public sphere scholars warn that the websphere as a proposed alternative to the mass media sphere too easily becomes insular and polarised to support democratically meaningfully publics (Sunstein 2007).

The focus in these debates tends to be either the civil society actors themselves (e.g. the NGOs) or the quality of the deliberation as such (e.g. in the mass media or in small-scale deliberative forums). This study instead directs attention to civil society networks and their potential as networked publics. Civil society network (CSN) relations may involve various kinds of civil society actors such as NGOs, the partially overlapping category of social movement organisations (SMOs), umbrella coalitions, and individuals. These CSNs may create—or fail to create—sustainable national and related transnational organisation structures that enable substantial numbers of people to engage with common public communication and action regarding complex issues. As it becomes increasingly difficult to detect broad organisational contact with citizens either through mass membership or mass media coverage (Koopmans & Statham 2010), focusing on networks allows us to determine the degree to which organisations are part of networks that regularly engage publics in various observable activities such as protests, online forums, and local meetings. We thus consider civil society organisations in terms of their role in networks that do or do not seek to engage public interest and participation in their causes. In the analysis of such networks, the quality of *depth* refers to the degree to which national and transnational civil society networks engage publics in ground level activities of various sorts (from local organisation to transnational protests). *Coherence* in turn refers both to the degree to which the networks manage to develop sustained sets of ideas and policy agendas and the degree to which they constitute continuous channels of action and communication measured in terms of network properties such as distribution of influence or structural holes (Burt 1992).

The project centres on communication with publics in these CSNs. The processes that are transforming civil society are changing the conditions for creation and use of mediated organisation structures, begging analysis of the uses of digital media to create information flows across issues, organisations, and national boundaries. This requires attention to a less examined aspect of communication in the mediated public sphere. While digital media are directly implicated in structuring action, the mass media public has primarily been considered through the lens of communication as information tool (Zaller 1992), means of identification (Anderson 1991) or deliberation (Habermas 1989). This study concentrates expressly on the organisational qualities of digital networking mechanisms as public markers of action both on and offline (Bennett and Segerberg 2009). Such mechanisms can take many forms, such as connectors (e.g. weblinks), interactive devices (e.g., blogs or protest calendars), and discursive networking (e.g. Twitter streams). Many of these real-time organisation mechanisms may remain behind as digital traces such as protest coalition sites or Twitter archives to help guide future action, structuring collective action across time, space and levels of actors. For example, even photos of actions left on Facebook or flickr can sustain individual to individual network links that create forms of organisation (Pentland & Feldman 2007), and these may exist independently of, in concert with, or in tension with organisation-level structures (Monge & Contractor 2003). We thus analyse the networks through their public digital communication: organisation and coalition web pages, link patterns to other organisations, interactive technologies for organisations to communicate with citizens and for citizens to use in communicating with each other, and indicators (e.g. protest photo posts) of action offline.

We analyse network depth and coherence with respect to organisational capacity to engage increasingly individualised citizens in sustained advocacy efforts. Participation through organisations and networks is typically assessed separately (Garrett 2006), and debates about the democratic implications of personalised action and communication tend to assume that organisation-centred and individualised modes of action and communication are in conflict. Yet many transnational issue areas involve complex publics in which diverse networks and action modes intersect (Bennett 2003; cf. Diani 2003; Tarrow forthcoming). The digital media that facilitate individual autonomy also allow organisations to experiment with entrepreneurial forms of association (Flanagin, Stohl & Bimber 2006), and much individualised action in fact occurs in organised settings. This creates a crisscross of individual, organisation and network action. A variety of digital media and platforms with their own specific code adds further complexity to the mix (Langlois et al. 2009). So what do different configurations in relations between organisations, and between organisations and individuals, in such contexts mean for network cohesion and depth? There are indications that some organisations are able to engage with individualised actors without sacrificing message coherence, while others are not (Bennett & Segerberg 2009). In some cases it also seems that combining individualised and collective discourses in technology-rich environments in fact reduces network fragmentation (Bennett et al. forthcoming).

Focusing on policy effectiveness may affect whether or not organisations seek

to engage publics and the communication strategies they employ. For this reason we further examine the network depth and coherence of CSNs with respect to transnational network relations with both publics and states. Surprisingly, even though state-authorised and supported civil society networks may be resource rich, they may not display the outlays of interactive technologies to communicate with publics that characterise grassroots NGO networks in the same issue sector (cf. Lang 2010). We map and compare networks of policy NGOs that are high level (i.e. sanctioned and in part funded by the EU) with mid-level networks in the same policy sector (i.e. involving organisations seeking EU policy access but which are not as clearly state sanctioned). The EU has authorised civil society platforms in eight broad policy areas, two of which are in our areas of environment and development. These platforms coordinate input to EU policy processes from their member organisations that operate both transnationally and within member states. Our research maps the two 'EU' networks down to ground level in different nations to assess their depth and coherence. We then map and evaluate mid-level networks in the same policy areas for the same properties. Under what conditions may digital technologies enable mid-level networks to achieve various degrees of sustainability, coherence and effectiveness?

Significance
The project's primary contribution is to analyse an emerging yet already significant feature of civil society in transformation: digitally networked (trans)national publics.

The project design complements previous research on several points:
- The focus on civil society *networks* broadens attention beyond isolated actors and media to recognise the complex actor and media ecology of the contemporary collective action landscape.
- The critical perspective on the role of *communication* in collective action and public sphere highlights the distinctive structure and dynamics of *digitally mediated* publics in contrast to mass mediated publics.
- The analysis of networks across *different contexts* gives a rich understanding of the dilemmas facing civil society actors under transnational and individualised conditions.
- The empirical techniques employed entail appropriate 'natively digital' *methodologies* novel to this field.

Equally importantly, analysing (trans)national publics through the lenses of communication and networks casts a perspective on the democratic qualities of depth and coherence according to which debates on *democratic legitimacy* in civil society may need to be revisited.

Project description
The empirical component of the project focuses on mapping and capturing data from digital records of high-level and mid-level civil society networks in two broad issue areas of environmental protection/climate change and trade/development/economic justice that reflect the transition to more individualised civil societies and that offer cases for testing coherence in transnational network activity. In addition, we also look at a series of protest events involving CSNs and other actors in these two broad issue areas with the aim of assessing how different net-

worked coalitions communicate with individuals and target actions and ideas in both national and transnational policy arenas.

The two broad issue areas are selected along several theoretically relevant criteria: they involve publics in both highly personalised and possibly collectivised action; they intersect with potential national and transnational publics and policy arenas; at the same time, civil society networks in both areas may be organised differently in different nations creating possible challenges for coherent transnational action; and preliminary investigation suggests that both issue clusters are represented in Europe via high-level (EU platform) and mid-level (NGO/SMO) networks that have relatively separate organisational memberships (with some overlap).

Phase I involves capturing the web networks or key coalitions involved in organising a series of protests in the UK surrounding the G20 London meetings on the global economic crisis in spring-summer 2009 and the Copenhagen Climate Conference in December 2009. These coalition network sites were captured at the time of the events using Mozilla scrapbook tools that capture fully operational offline versions of sites and linked sites. In preliminary examination of these sites, we note linkage across our two issue areas. Organisations in both environment and economic networks seem to be uniting around the issues rather than trading one issue for the other (e.g., jobs vs. environment), resulting in an interesting set of overlapping actors in the two protest series and a handoff of the economic protest sequence to the environment sequence. The full analysis of this rich data set will entail several discrete studies that address different aspects of our theoreti-

cal question about public engagement in individualising societies: 1) a combination of automated and qualitative methods will be used to summarise collective action discourses in different network clusters (e.g., mainstream NGO coalitions with members such as Oxfam or Greenpeace vs. anarchist networks with groups such as the Space Hijackers and Climate Camp). We will determine the degree to which different networked discourses open to individualised co-construction (indicating varying levels of inter-organisational openness to forming more loosely tied relationships with publics); 2) a content analysis of the political policy goals of different protest coalitions (from statements on the websites) will provide indicators of whether more personalised collective action framing observed in study 1 undermines the coherence of political goals at the organisation and network levels; 3) finally, we will conduct an inventory of the dozens of interactive digital mechanisms on coalition sites that enable individuals to affiliate on relatively personal terms via choices involving protest themes and tactics. (Such individual linking mechanisms include sending personal messages to government officials, posting personal photos, downloading toolkits, commenting on blogs, joining Twitter streams, among many others). The prediction here is that protest networks that offer relatively more open discourses to publics will also create a broader array of digital connective mechanisms to enable individuals to produce and manage micro-level engagement networks before, during and after the events themselves. These different empirical studies will enable us to answer questions about whether loosely networked relationships established through digital media permit depth of public engagement (measured by

various indicators of individual level content sharing), sustainability of networks (over the series of protests and linkages across the two issue areas), and observable measures of organisational goal maintenance. In addition, we will generate network maps (see methods below) to assess whether the different discourse and linkage processes also explain distance and closeness of the member organisations in different sectors of the protest space.

Phase II of the project will entail rendering broad transnational network maps of the environment and development issue networks and then drilling into the ground-level organisational structures and engagement activities of these networks in three nations with varying traditions of state – civil society relations (UK, Germany, Sweden) (Trägårdh 2007). The aims here are to identify the bridging mechanisms (e.g., multinational NGOs, state supported NGOs) between transnational and national issue networks, and to assess national level similarities and differences in network relationship structures (density, closeness, influence) and engagement mechanisms (similar to the measures described in the protest networks above). These networks will be rendered from different starting points to see how high-level networks may differ from mid-level CSNs.

Since there is no generic one-size-fits-all algorithm for generating network maps for qualitatively different networks, each series of networks will require devising a different (but comparable) mapping strategy. Although space limits prevent a full methodological discussion, we sketch the logic here. The trade/development grassroots networks are interesting because there is an already established transnational system of fair trade certification, labelling, monitoring and marketing through 21 national labelling organisations, fifteen of which are in European nations. We will generate the map of the European network using these members and several coordinating organisations as starting points. The environment/climate change networks will start from a list of recognised environmental NGOs working on climate change with chapters in more than five EU nations, augmented by another list of NGOs and SMOs produced by Google searches of climate change campaigns operating in our three key countries. We will eliminate duplicate organisations and create a combined list of starting points. The mid-level EU trade/economic development and environmental networks will be started from the member lists of the EU NGO civil society platforms in those two areas. All starting points will be fed into the IssueCrawler (http://www.govcom.org/scenarios_use.html), a web crawling tool developed at the University of Amsterdam. The crawler can be set to different network parameters. We propose to generate co-link networks that drill three levels deep into websites and follow links to external sites two iterations (or clicks) out from the starting sites. New sites are added to the network if they receive links from two or more of the starting points for each iteration. In this fashion, we will generate four master maps of transnational European networks (with some points beyond Europe, of course): a high-level and a mid-level network in each of the two issue areas. We will compare the networks using various measures of network density and centrality (inlink distributions, outlink distributions, standardised path distances) to reveal similarities and differences, along with identifying national clusters, dominant actors, and the centrality of state organisations. We derive networks for our

three national cases, starting crawls from outlinks from the national organisations that appear in the transnational maps (these national networks are also likely to include varying degrees of spillover beyond borders, which is also an interesting observable).

We then take the sites in each national network and use a combination of methods to determine levels of citizen outreach and engagement, consistency of issue framing across national cases, and comparative focus on state policy targets. The high- level and mid-level CSNs providing one axis for these comparisons, and the difference in issue areas provides another axis. The organisations in each national network will be examined for the inventory of engagement mechanisms described above in the phase I protest network study, as well as coded for content patterns that define policy issue framing, state targets, and references to publics. Automated content analysis will be conducted using an issue scraper tool (also made available to us by Richard Rogers at University of Amsterdam) that enables entire networks of websites to be searched for content terms or phrases, and all pages containing the designated content to be harvested for further machine and human coding.

In this fashion, we will compare the high-level and mid-level sites and the different issue areas for levels of public engagement and various ground level civil society activities going on in the three national cases, providing a 3x2x3 design in a complex natural overview of public engagement and the role of digital technologies in structuring national and transnational civil society networks.

Limitations: throughout this research, many of the digital artefacts that we capture can be understood as actually occurring structuring elements in collective action networks, while others are more abstract indicators of larger engagement and relationship patterns that of course are not fully observable with these methods. For example, web link patterns reflect intentional displays of recognition (or the absence thereof) among organisations. By contrast, our mapped representations of large-scale networks are necessarily high-level renderings that, like satellite images, do not pretend to reveal what is going on inside organisations, or to detect small organisations that may not be engaged in broader networks or that may not use digital media to signal their presence. This said, we are able to drill into a rich variety of data, from NGO websites to individual level content in Twitter streams, to produce fine grained comparative analyses of civil society relationships and activities at ground level, with indicators of offline activities that may provide the basis for future study.

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