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Convivial media

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Abstract

The Net has been used in numerous episodes of people's action in varying ways, from straightforward communication to Website blockades and sabotage. Here we look briefly at two Net campaigns: the campaign against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and the ongoing Net campaign in support of the Zapatistas in Mexico. These case studies help provide insight into features of "convivial media" that activists should be using and promoting.

Convivial Media
Brian Martin and Wendy Varney

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Bit 1

The Net has been used in numerous episodes of people's action in varying ways, from straightforward communication to Website blockades and sabotage. Here we look briefly at two Net campaigns: the campaign against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) and the ongoing Net campaign in support of the Zapatistas in Mexico. These case studies help provide insight into features of "convivial media" that activists should be using and promoting.

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The MAI can be seen as an attempt to increase the power of multinational corporations in relation to national laws and to roll back progressive legislation. It was promoted in secret by power brokers from the wealthiest countries. From the time the draft document was leaked in 1997, anti-MAI activists found the Net extremely useful in organising their campaigns, particularly as time was imperative. With deadlines to beat, activists needed to disseminate information quickly and to as many groups and individuals as possible. In a counter to the secrecy of the pro-MAI lobby, activists put all the relevant documentation on the Net, including the draft proposal itself and transcripts of inquiries relevant to it. As well as e-mail, which was useful in alerting groups to developments as they occurred, the Net was used for lobbying, discussions and sharing both information and ideas (Varney and Martin). Most notably, it proved efficient for the purpose of organising a campaign and was conducive to democratic participation.

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The Zapatista movement or Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) began in 1983, largely as a result of Mexico's economic crisis, from which peasants in Chiapas particularly suffered. There had been decreases in subsidies for the agricultural poor and the reduction or elimination of governmental organisations and programs that, in part, assisted peasant and Indian farmers. Many of the social problems of the Chiapas region resulted from corporate globalisation. The Zapatistas launched their own global efforts, a type of citizens' globalisation, using the Net to obtain international support.

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When 45 indigenous people were killed in the Acteal massacre in Chiapas, word spread quickly via the Net, leading to protests and actions at Mexican consulates and embassies around the world. But use of the Net has not been confined to communications in the Zapatista struggle. It has also become "a site for action".

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For example, the Javascript Floodnet programme was produced by the Electronic Disturbance Theatre to flood and block targeted Websites by repeatedly calling for a specific or non-existent Web page on that server. The programme is posted on a Website which participants are asked to visit during designated times. With sufficient activists involved, this renders the Website inaccessible for the duration of the attack. Up to 10,000 people have been estimated to have taken part in one single Floodnet action, sending 600,000 hits per minute to each of the three targeted Websites.

The Website of Mexican President Zedillo was the first and is an

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ongoing target. These actions are described as mass "virtual sit-ins" against the Mexican government. Sometimes "hacktivists" have added political messages to Mexican government Websites, thereby reaching an audience which might not normally access activist sites.

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Clearly the pro-Zapatista Net campaign goes beyond the use of the Net in the anti-MAI campaign, which was restricted to conveying information, networking and the various aspects of running a campaign. If the Net was a major *aid* to the anti-MAI campaign, in the case of the pro-Zapatista struggle, it has *become* the campaign, with Dan Tschirgi noting that the networks of nonviolent support that the Zapatistas have formed have largely determined the nature of their present struggle.

Communication media can be used by different groups and for different purposes, but that doesn't mean they are neutral. It is possible to itemise the features of media that are especially suited to grassroots citizen action and less easy for élite groups to control. These include:

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- one-to-one communication
- low cost
- easy to use
- widely available
- entrenched
- surveillance-resistant
- censorship-resistant
- disruption-resistant

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All these features make it hard for a small number of people to control communication by or to others. A medium that has most or all of these characteristics can be called a "convivial communication medium", in the spirit of Ivan Illich's concept of "convivial technology".

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The Net has most of these features. Email allows one-to-one communication that is low in cost and easy to use. It is widely available in rich countries, though there is a long way to go before it becomes a global people's technology. The Net is entrenched because of its commercial uses. Attempts by governments to shut down or control the Net would be opposed by businesses as well as activists. So although commercialism is a threat to the sharing ethos of the Net, at the same time it provides considerable protection from external control. Finally, surveillance, censorship and disruption of Net communication do occur but have limits due to the overwhelming volume of messages and the possibility of self-publication.

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The Net is only the latest in convivial communication media. Most of these features are found in face-to-face conversations, the postal system and the telephone system. In contrast, broadcast television is one of the least convivial media. It is one-to-many communication and, while cheap and easy to use as a viewer, is extremely expensive and technically challenging to be a broadcaster.

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The Net has one big advantage over earlier convivial communication media: it is possible to publish material, via the Web, that is widely available without editorial control. The closest approximation previously was printing and distributing leaflets.

In conclusion, there are two rather different types of activism in

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relation to the Net, with each demonstrating quite different convivialities. One uses the medium in standard ways and strictly for communication purposes while another undermines its standard uses and parallels graffiti, sit-ins, blockades. The latter use comes at a cost and with some risk, however. For instance, the Mexican government and the Pentagon have retaliated to Floodnetting by prompting Floodnet participants' browsers to crash. With their huge array of electronic and other resources, governments and multinational corporations are well positioned to engage in "Netwar". Vulnerabilities that computer activists have discovered make their own campaigns and Websites vulnerable.

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Nonetheless, activists should seek to use convivial communication media whenever possible. Whatever media they use, they should try to strengthen their convivial features. Finally, they should be involved in efforts to promote new convivial media so that the communication technologies of the future embrace desirable social features on a wider scale.

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