

Online Political Activism: The use of new information and communication technology during phases of political mobilization

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ISSN 1503-0946

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UNI RESEARCH AS

MAY 2010

Working Paper 6 - 2010

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Sammendrag

Forskning på politisk deltakelse har vist at internett kan være en spesielt godt egnet kanal for grasrotorganisasjoner og for politisk mobilisering på ad-hoc basis. Imidlertid vet vi lite om hvordan aktivister faktisk bruker den nye teknologien og hvorvidt dette varierer mellom ulike faser i en mobiliseringsprosess. Dette notatet presenterer en analyse av hvordan en enkelt aktivistgruppe brukte internett for å mobilisere, informere og øve innflytelse på en bestemt politisk beslutning. Resultatet viser at aktivistgruppen benyttet nettet på en rasjonell måte for å nå sine mål. Aktivistenes hjemmeside fungerte som en informasjonskanal overfor offentligheten og de folkevalgte. E-postlisten hadde en intern funksjon og ble brukt til å delegere konkrete oppgaver og til å formulere argumenter som kunne snu utfallet i aktivistenes favør. Den fungerte i liten grad som et medium for interne debatter, men derimot som et redskap for rask politisk mobilisering med sikte på å endre et politisk vedtak. Da aktivistene til slutt nådde målet sitt, løste nettverket seg opp.

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Summary

Research suggests that the Internet is especially well suited for grassroots organizations and ad hoc political mobilization. Still we know less about how activists actually use the new technologies and whether this varies during the different phases of political mobilization. This research paper analyzes how a single issue activist group used internet in order to mobilize, inform and influence one specific political decision. The results depicts that the activists used technologies in purposeful and rational ways. The activists' website functioned as a broadcast channel to the outside world and politicians. The email list had an internal function and was used to delegate concrete tasks and to formulate arguments that could tip the balance in favor of the activists. It was not intended to create internal debate, but to mobilize quickly in order to change a political decision. When the activists eventually achieved their goal, the network fell apart.

KEY WORDS * Activists * Political mobilization * Websites * Email lists * Norway * Online activism * Internet * Ad hoc mobilization

Introduction

Whereas political participation within conventional channels has declined, it seems easier to engage people in political activities that require less constant effort (Norris 1999; Togeby 2005; Oscarsson 2003; Strømsnes 2003). Parallel to this, the spread and popularity of new information and communication technologies (ICT) have increased, and the research literature argues that the new technologies are particularly well suited to grassroots organizations and ad hoc mobilization (Budge 1996; Scott and Street 2000; Norris and Curtice 2004; Garrett 2006). Some researchers even foresee modern ICT helping to «[boost] the importance of issue groups that exist only for the duration of a single political effort» (Garrett 2006: 211, with references to Bimber 2000).

As pointed out by Kavada (2008:220), however, the broader question of how single-issue activists use ICT has received scant attention in the literature. In this paper we examine how ICT are used within the single issue activist group *Byen Vår* (Our City), established in 2005 to fight against advertisement-financed street furniture and public facilities (buss passenger shelters, city bicycles and public restrooms) in the municipality of Bergen, Norway. We examine how *Byen Vår* used new information and communication technologies in order to mobilize, inform and influence this political decision. Which technologies did the activist use? What did they use it for, and did they use it differently during the various phases of the mobilization process?

The first section of the paper gives an account of our approach. Here we distinguish between types of technology and their use in relation to information, communication and political mobilization/influence both internal (between activists) and external (directed towards the political system, potential coalition partners and the population in general). Thereafter we present our data. This is followed by a presentation of how the case unfolded, and where we divide the mobilization process into distinct phases. In the empirical analysis, we first account for the technologies used by *Byen Vår* and then analyse their contents. Our focus is mainly on the activist network's website and use of email lists. We analyse the communication via the email list during the different phases of mobilization. The paper concludes with a discussion of our main findings.

Approach

The relations between ICT, organization and democracy comprise a growing field of research. While earlier literature has speculated in various arguments for and against digital democracy, and about the possible political effects of new ICT (Budge 1996; Barber 1999; Davis 1999), recent empirical research focuses on how Internet and net-based communication tools (e.g., email) are used in established institutions and organizations such as municipalities, administrative agencies, voluntary organizations and political parties (Fountain 2001; Christensen and Aars 2002; Haug 2003; Saglie and Vabo 2005; Gibson et al. 2003; Pedersen and Saglie 2005; Torpe et al. 2005; Tranvik and Selle 2008). One (for us) relevant finding in this literature is that technology accommodates itself to the various activities and ways of thinking of different

organizations. We should therefore expect type of organization (in our case, a network of activists) to matter for the way technologies are used.

Our starting point is that various technologies are tools network-based activist groups can use in different ways. Activism is inherently a goal oriented activity; it concerns putting an issue on the public agenda, reversing a political decision or influencing a decision process in a specific direction. This means that technologies will have *external* as well as *internal* functions. Hence, we conceive of new ICT as providing activists with a specific opportunity structure, and that they can fulfil three main functions for an activist network.

First, ICT generally, and Internet in particular, can be used for *disseminating information* to the general public (so-called broadcasting, see Kavada 2008). A website can, e.g., enable activists to reach people directly with a political message by presenting the background and motivation for their activism. They thereby avoid the filtering mechanism that characterizes other mass media. However, what activists promulgate via Internet must be interpreted in light of the picture they want to portray. When we study a website, it is insufficient to merely examine the contents found there; just as important is the information left out. This aspect of control can also be important for the way the technology is used *internally* in the activist network (so-called narrowcasting, see Kavada 2008). Just as with other groups, activists need to test strategies and viewpoints before they are publicly launched, and internal email lists can be used to develop various forms of self-censure. It is therefore worth studying how different opinions internal to the network come to expression – whether all information is available to everyone, or whether technologies are also used to differentiate between internal participants.

Second, new technologies can be used to create an *arena for debate*. While traditional mass media only allow one-way communication, Internet allows citizens to dialogue with others who also communicate electronically. There are many ways to organize debates via Internet (Grönlund and Ranerup 2001; Melby 2002), e.g., email lists from which to follow «threads» from earlier contributions, net-based voting, political blogs and rather technically complicated debate systems. Hence, activists have several options when it comes to organizing debates. One way is to create external and open debate forums where anyone and everyone, via, e.g., the activists' website, can enter into direct political debate about the issue at hand. An alternative is to set up a more internal solution, by using a closed debate forum or email list that mass-distribute entries to participants who are usually pre-registered. This interactivity enables message receivers to communicate with senders and to influence them. It can be used to create new forms of democratic dialogue, be they internal (between activists) or external (between activists and the society at large). Worth noting, however, is that although Internet opens a *possibility* for interactive collaboration, one can not assume that communication through the Internet is always interactive (Schultz 2000). As pointed out by Hacker and Pierson (2006:205), «Technology is not destiny». ICT can give activists enormous opportunities for mobilization, but they are still only opportunities.

Third, ICT can fulfil an important *mobilization and influence function*. The ad hoc network's objective is to turn a decision in a specific direction. Externally, this involves using technologies to mobilize support for the activists' viewpoint. It can involve spreading unfavourable information about their opponent, and information that can tip

the balance for key decision makers. Let alone, it will be important to use technologies to build alliances with other stakeholders with an interest in the issue, by publishing information that can interest, engage and mobilize them. Activists also have the choice between using internet for broadcasting, i.e. an information portal directed towards people in general, or using it as a direct mobilization channel (e.g. organize and plan demonstration, sign petitions online etc). Also internally, new technologies expand the activists' scope of action (Garett 2006). Computer networks provide immediate communication, thus making decisions and collaboration happen significantly faster, at any time of the day or night, and thus also more effectively. These characteristics are well suited to activist networks' ad hoc engagement (Riba 2003). New ICT allow activists to increase their tempo of interaction, independent of geographic location (van de Donk et al. 2004), and it is reasonable to assume that this makes it significantly easier to coordinate activism.

Before examining the case and how Byen Vår deployed new ICT, we briefly present the data on which this study is founded.

Data

The analyses are based on three main data sources. First, we have systematically gone through Byen Vår's website (<http://talsmann.no>) and all its hyperlinks. This is easily accessible information. Studies of websites usually find their point of departure in two broad categories of use: 1) Information: To what degree does the website provide comprehensive insight into the complexity of an issue? 2) Communication and debate: Does the website make it possible for individuals to debate the issue? (Grønlund and Ranerup 2001). Thus an important distinction is made between websites geared primarily towards disseminating information about an issue, and websites that also invite community members to participate (static versus more interactive websites). This distinction is also an important starting point for our analysis. In addition, we add the opportunity for direct mobilization via the website. Is the website also used to organize petitions, demonstrations, or to mobilize people in general for political activism?

Second, we have reviewed all emails sent within the email list byen@uib.no during the period of activism and its aftermath (from June 16, 2005 to December 4, 2006). This includes more than 300 emails sent over a period of 1 ½ years. Most emails (2/3) were written within two months (September and October 2005). The email list byen@uib.no was private and hosted by the University of Bergen. Individual persons had to subscribe to and log onto it via a personal password.¹ The list only accepted email from persons who were already registered on it, and one had to send email from the address registered in the list's address archive in order to have it sent. If someone sent mail from another address, it were placed on a «waiting list» and the list administrator had to accept the mail. We sent an email to the list owner in February 2007, asking for permission to conduct an analysis of the list archive. The list owner forwarded our mail to members of

¹ See <http://mailman.uib.no/listinfo/byen>. Mailman is a computer program used to administer email discussions (see <http://www.gnu.org/software/mailman/mailman.html>). The program also automatically generates an archive that can sort entries according to author, date, subject or thread, and thereby helps to simplify analysis of the material.

the email list, asking if anyone had any objection in allowing us to access the archive. Twelve persons in all replied, and all consented to the archive being used for research.

This data provides valuable insight into how such activist networks function. Emails are written in the form of internal communication between network activists, and probably without reflecting over the possibility that the material might be analysed later. The material offers a large degree of contemporaneity because arguments are presented just as they were when the activism was underway, and without the subsequent rationalization often occurring in interviews conducted in an event's aftermath. It is thus to a greater extent possible to analyse the material in its initial context, than what is the case for interviews or ethnographic studies (Langner 2001; Wilhelm 2000, chapter 5). Also beneficial is that emails are written sources; we can quote activists in writing, using their own formulations (here translated from Norwegian). Nevertheless, there are also drawbacks to using such material. First of all, it is important to not interpret this material as being the full, exhaustive communication between the activists, as we know less about other communication taking place between them. In our case, a great deal of communication also transpired between certain members (the so-called core group) parallel to the regular email list. This is one reason why we have deemed it important to supplement information gleaned from the email list with interviews (see below). Another problem is that Internet users can communicate while hiding their identity. As such, we have no guarantee the individual actor *is* who he or she claims to be. In our material, there is, e.g., an actor who signs on as *pippi.langstrompe* (Pippi Longstockings), and we do not know who this person is. All things considered, however, we do not consider this as a big problem.

There are different ways of analysing this sort of data, and quantitative as well as qualitative strategies can be used. Because our chief interest is in how communication happens and what the information between activists consists of, we have approached the material mostly from a qualitative perspective. According to Kavada (2005:93), using qualitative techniques within this field make us «better able to capture these relationships with all their hues and nuances». Just as with the website, we are interested in finding out how much the email list is used to transmit information and concrete messages, or whether it is used for debating and exchanging points of view or to mobilize for activism. In addition, we are interested in simple quantitative measures, like how many list members are active and the degree to which activity on the list reflects the intensity of the mobilization process.

The third source of data consists of qualitative interviews with key informants in the network and others involved in the case.² We have interview material from six of the most central activists in *Byen Vår*, and an interview with a journalist who covered the case for the local newspaper. In addition, we have been in contact with the server administrator at the University of Bergen, because the email list was housed at the university. The interviews were conducted between November 27, 2006 and March 20, 2007. In addition to information about the cluster of issues related to the case, and about the activists' work methods, we have been especially intent upon interviewing those responsible for the technical solutions the network used.

² We would like to direct our thanks to Trond Ekornrud for help in interviewing.

Mobilization phases

The activist group Byen Vår was established after Bergen city council in the spring of 2005 negotiated a contract with Clear Channel to supply advertisement financed public furnishings and facilities. Information about the contract was initially withheld from the public because it was defined as a business deal. Making the contract public was Byen Vår's first demand. In the beginning the group consisted of students and culture workers, but it eventually appealed to a wide spectrum of interests. The arguments launched against the contract also varied widely, and included, among other things, aesthetic considerations, Bergen city patriotism, economic factors and navigability.

When activists mobilizes against a concrete issue such as this, there will often be distinct moments of change, milestones, which help determine the activism's character and affect changes in concrete goals and forms of activism. In this specific case, four outstanding milestones lead us to analyse the mobilization as falling into *five distinct phases* (see *Figure 1*). The first milestone was when the contract was made public on June 22, 2005. Before this date the activists had discussed the issue generally, but now they could take a more concrete point of departure in the actual contract and develop arguments based specifically on it. The second decisive milestone was September 19, 2005, when the city council discussed the contract and resolved to postpone the final decision. Activism up until this first city council treatment can be characterized primarily as an argument-development phase. The third milestone was October 11, 2005, when an open hearing on the contract was arranged. In the weeks before the hearing, the activists worked to build as wide a network as possible against the contract. The last milestone was October 24, 2005, when the city council again met to discuss the contract and ended up rejecting it. Between October 11 and 24, intense political mobilization took place to try to get political parties and individual politicians to reverse their positions. In the last phase, after October 24, the entire context changed, because the network, thus far mobilizing widely *against* the contract, now was challenged to pull together in relation to what it was *for*. Now the critical issue became much more a matter of agreeing on an alternative to the rejected contract (policy formation).

Figure 1: *Activism against Clear Channel in Bergen, timeline.*

Discussion → Developing arguments → Network building → Political mobilization → Policy formation

06. 22. 05	09. 19. 05	10. 11 .05	10. 24. 05
Contract	First	Public	Second
made public	city council meeting	hearing	city council meeting

Technology used

Byen Vår used a wide range of information and communication technologies in its mobilization against the contract between Clear Channel and Bergen Municipality. At the very beginning of its activism the group established a blog, but this lasted only for a

short time.³ It was seldom used and functioned poorly, among other reasons, because it had a complicated address and required a password to gain access (Informant #5).

The activist group launched a signature campaign at <http://www.opprop.no>. This is a website run by a national newspaper (Dagbladet) which freely hosts electronic signature lists. Instead of using a traditional signature list via their homepage, it was important for the activists to use a neutral actor who could guarantee the appeal's credibility. An added bonus was the ease with which [opprop.no](http://www.opprop.no) could be used (Informant #7). The appeal was entitled «Stop the Sale of Bergensians», and it was possible to sign it either via email or «short message service» (SMS).⁴ Calls to sign the appeal were distributed and passed from actor to actor, and during the period of activism, 3,500 signatures were collected. This makes the campaign one of the most signed appeals at [opprop.no](http://www.opprop.no).⁵

The protest action also needed a website to inform the public about the case. The activists chose to use an existing domain owned by one of the network's central figures (<http://www.talsmann.no>). The main reasons for this were that the website was needed right away, and that the domain name seemed to fit well («talsmann» literally translates as «spokesman»). While the protest action lasted, there were, on average, 400 hits per day on the website, and it was updated daily during this period (Informant #1).

In addition to the website, the email list was important (byenvår@uib.no). This was set up by a student and launched on the University of Bergen's server.⁶ At most, approximately 200 persons were registered here (Informant #1).⁷ This list consisted primarily of email addresses gathered at meetings. A mass emailing was also sent to everyone who signed the appeal at www.opprop.no, inviting them to join the email list. There was no «free» or «open» way to add names to the email list; every name and email address had to first be approved, so that no one would be able to infiltrate the list (Informant #1). Neither was there a link from the homepage to the email list or information about the email list at the homepage. There was only an email address through which the activist group could be contacted. In addition to the email list byenvår@uib.no, there was also a shorter and more private email list of eight to ten persons who qualifies as the activist network's core. This list was used for «behind-the-scene mailing» in relation to issues addressed on the «long» email list (Informant #5, see below). Here the core group could discuss and lay plans without their mails being read by all 200 people on the main email list.

3 <http://byenvaar.blogspot.com/>

4 An activist was also posted on the main city square with a traditional signature list, intended to gathering up those with no access to Internet, but these signatures were never delivered to the politicians (Informant #3).

5 There was also an attempt to start a separate appeal amongst academics («Akademikeroppropet»), but this was not as successful (Informant #5).

6 According to our informant from the Information Technology Department at University of Bergen, there were no negative reactions to the email list being under the auspices of the university. «The IT department sets up email lists for students and employees who contact us, and very seldom will we evaluate what the list is for» (Informant #8). The activists, however, evaluated the issue, but decided that «we would not do anything about it unless we were contacted by them» (Informant #1).

7 When we joined the list in February 2007, in order to gain access to its contents, only 84 persons remained on it. Many cancelled their membership after the case was won, and the number sank quickly to around 150. «The list has not been used very much since then, but almost every time someone posts something on it, one or two people cancel their membership» (Informant #1).

Yet not only ICT, but also older forms of information and communication technology played important roles in the protest action. For example, the telephone was a critical tool when activists made personal calls to diverse interest groups and politicians of various parties to try to build alliances.

In the following pages we look more closely at what we perceive the two most important technologies used by the activists: the website and the email list.

The website

Various criteria are commonly used to analyse websites. We have chosen to examine the website's structure, contents, opportunities for debate (the possibility for two-way communication) and mobilization features.

The website for the activist group Byen Vår is first of all structured around the contract and the municipality's handling of it, in addition to disseminating negative information about Clear Channel. The title chosen for the homepage is «Bergen vs. Clear Channel». It is a simple website, deliberately designed to be «not too fancy». It was deemed important that it 'looked like an honest and genuinely felt involvement' (Informant #1). Only one person administered the website; he updated it, selected its contents and answered email. There has thus been a centralized information strategy, and questions about the website's administration have not been discussed within the activist group (Informant #1).

As for contents, the website functioned largely as a broadcasting information portal which almost exclusively presented the issue from one angle. Information was primary, both during the mobilization of activism and in its aftermath. The website's purpose, as is now formulated on the homepage after the events of 2005, also emphasizes information:

October 24, 2005, Bergen City Council made a wise and foresighted decision by cancelling the competition for advertisement financed public furnishings and facilities. The purpose of this website is to provide background information about why we believe this was a wise decision, and to make information available to others who want to work against this type of contract (<http://www.talsmann.no>, translated).

The homepage contains links to case documents, official policy proposals and resolutions by the city council, a collection of arguments against advertisement financed public furnishings, a collection of press clippings (over 100 articles and other entries from diverse media in 2005), information (negative) about Clear Channel as a company, and individual references and links to comparable protest actions in Oslo and Trondheim. It also offers video clips of important events. On the whole, we can conclude that the website contains a great deal of information, but that it, as would be expected, presents a one-sided perspective of the issue.

Just as important as which information can be found on the website is which information is left out. To begin with, there is no introductory statement addressing the question «Who are we?». There is no presentation of who stands behind the activism, other than a diffuse sentence stating that the protest action was started by «[a]rchitect students, artists, teachers, worried parents, students and other citizens of Bergen».

Furthermore, the site contains numerous links to other sources, e.g., newspaper debates, but has little self-produced information, that is, information written solely for the website. Instead, the activist group regularly used other mass media to express its viewpoints, and after publication, these were linked to the website. Bergens Tidende in particular wrote a great deal about the case. In the media archive «A-text», there are approximately 200 Bergens Tidende entries dealing with Clear Channel during the period of activism (see Christensen and Strømsnes 2007). Talsmann.no has links to about half of these.

As for two-way communication, there is no possibility for this from the website. There is no «click here and have your say» feature. This may have to do with the nature of the target group. No issues are mentioned that could create antagonism between divergent yet allied groups. The website is not notably ideological, but rather a level-headed (albeit one-sided) amassment of arguments. There is also a desire to distance Byen Vår from radical groups who also address the Clear Channel issue, and the website is deliberately presented in a tone that can appeal not only to partisans, but to those who are more moderate or undecided, and to help influence them (Informant #1). The website was not used to mobilize for demonstrations, and neither were there any possibilities for signing petitions or express attitudes on the issue at the website. While the website's intention is to reach «everyone», and therefore downplay ideological aspects, it is more probable that the email list functioned as a meeting place for the like-minded.

The email list

At its inception, the email list was designed as an open list, yet individuals had to register to join. Two people were responsible for determining who could join the list and what information was posted, yet no one who wanted to join was denied access, neither were any emails stopped (Informant #1). The email list was also open in the sense that no special rules were given to regulate the discussion. In the very first email, there is an attachment with general information about email lists, and how one should behave in such a forum («netiquette»), e.g., to not write with capital letters, because it could be interpreted as SHOUTING at the receiver (Melby 2002). Beyond this, few guidelines for the debate were given.

Below we look closer at the activity and the content on the e-mail list during the different mobilization phases.

Phase 1: Initial discussion

The first message in the email archive is dated June 16, 2005. Here participants are welcomed and oriented on how the email list functions, e.g., about how to join the list, and how it is possible to use a filtering function to sort messages from the list and put them in a special folder. There is also a direct reference to the activist's website. Subscribers (90 at that time) are listed at the end of the message.

There is a good deal of discussion and debate on the list at the start. Amongst the themes discussed during this phase are the use of the phrase «Sale of Bergensians» (the

title used at opprop.no), the extent to which Switzerland is a nation of culture (since it is so clean and well-organized), what distinguishes advertisements on public furnishings from other kinds of advertisements, what the Left Socialist Party's policy is on the issue, and how Byen Vår should position itself in relation to the Left Socialist Party. Several suggestions for newspaper feature-articles and replies are discussed on the list as well. There is also a suggestion to discuss which role the email list should have – whether it should be a discussion list or a channel used mostly for sending emails. Some people want a lot of discussion while others want to work in a more goal-oriented way, and those wanting more discussion do not always feel they receive the responses they want:

You guys, I feel it is almost embarrassing, storming silence on the list after I dared to mention some questions that struck me after reading [...] contribution, (June, 27, 05).

From June 16 to the end of the month there are 26 contributions to the list. There are nine writers, two of which dominate. Of these two, one is clearly against the Clear Channel contract, while the other is more ambivalent.

Phase 2: Development of arguments

After the contract is made public, a more goal-oriented phase starts, and a working group convenes to work with the issue through the summer. This becomes the core of the network. An invitation to participate in this is sent to everyone:

To all email list participants: We must begin to tighten our grasp on strategies between now and the city council meeting on September 19. [...] We need people who will lobby politicians, take initiative, give reactions, act as activists, etc. The working group will hold a meeting at week's end to lay plans for the summer. Those who would like to participate more or less actively in the work can mail me directly. Everyone is welcome to participate! (July 3, 05).

There is relatively little activity on the mailing list until the end of August, when a new meeting is scheduled and list participants are once again invited to join the working group.

During this phase, up until the first city council treatment on September 19, the main focus is on developing arguments, orienting list members about different events and initiatives, and about mobilizing in relation to concrete tasks. A distinct set of arguments is developed, dealing with financial considerations, democracy, public freedom of expression, Bergen as a brand, aesthetic evaluations, and ramifications for local business and cultural life. Further mobilization occurs in connection with concrete tasks: calling and sending email to city council members, being a disputant at the city council meeting, or presenting the list of signatures to the mayor. A copy is posted, of a fact-oriented email that was sent to every member of the city council, along with the admonition to others on the list to also send email to city council representatives. «*Write concisely about the issue from your own perspective – and send it to the city council members*» (Sep. 15, 05). With this mail is an attachment of email addresses for all city council members.

In the beginning the mobilization seems to proceed slowly, but eventually activity increases. When the leader of Bergen's annual jazz festival Nattjazz, says «No, thank you» to Bergen Municipality's culture prize, because he believes the city is selling itself

too cheaply, this is lionized as a very important symbolic act, and an act which put the spotlight on the economic side of the contract between the city council and Clear Channel. «*Some people do not care about the environment or historical inheritance. Many people do not care about aesthetics. But many of those who today are in favour of the contract understand economics*» (Sep. 16, 05). Regarding participation in the city council meeting, email list members are admonished to «*Be there and show your presence and your concern, but behave well...*» (Sep. 18, 05).

There are eight new writers on the list during this period.

Phase 3: Network building

The next phase – after the city council decided to postpone the case, and until the open hearing on October 11 – largely concerned mobilizing different groups and creating a wide network in support of the cause. This period is to a much greater extent punctuated by strategic thinking about working locally as well as nationally (and even internationally). An appeal amongst academics is attempted in connection with Jürgen Habermas coming to Bergen to receive the Holberg Prize («*What if we could get him to address the issue...could anyone get a hold of his email address?*» Sep. 29, 05).

During this period there is also mobilization through concrete appeals for action – «*Everyone who knows a politician from the Christian People's Party, call! call!*» (Sep. 20, 05), «*Everyone who knows anyone leading an urban residents' association – call call!*» (Sep. 25, 05). And different people sign up to work with various target groups and to mobilize sundry organizations (labour unions, the National Association for the Blind, the Norwegian Association of Handicapped Persons, urban residents' associations, etc.) to show up at the open hearing. There is also a fair amount of activity with planning a concert and a torchlight procession before the concert (this last suggestion was dropped after a discussion on the list). In addition, far more critical information about Clear Channel as a company is dug up (from it being a neo-liberal American company to information about the so-called «Outdoor Bible», i.e. a series of instructions the Swedish division of Clear Channel made for its outdoor advertisers, with ten «commandments» for how to be most effective in advertising. The advice includes the use of sex, children and animals).

Most internal mobilization during this period happens via telephone and email. Plans are made to set up a meeting, but it is cancelled because «*everyone is working well in each their own way, and we are in the process of getting quite detailed tasks between now and the hearing on October 11. Therefore: we'll do it via telephone or email instead.*» (Sep. 27, 05).

There are ten new writers on the email list during this period, including local politicians with in-depth knowledge about how the representative system functions. Only five of the people who wrote emails in the two first phases are also active in this phase.

Phase 4: Political mobilization

There is extensive activity on the email list in the period between the open hearing and the city council meeting less than two weeks later. Now the question arises of creating an alternative to the Clear Channel contract. Work is also far more systematic in relation

to individual political parties (*«It's important not to forget the Liberal Party. Is anyone working specifically with the Liberal Party?»* Oct. 14, 05). Efforts are made to create a situation where it is possible for politicians to reverse their position without losing face. An important event in this respect is when Clear Channel threatens to sue the municipality – *«To this it is not embarrassing to say No, Thank You»* (Oct. 18, 05).⁸

The email list also performs a critical function in relation to coordinating public statements. This particularly concerns the necessity for always keeping to facts and to not come across as hot tempered and sour. The chief strategy therefore is

... that we can manage to draw a picture of ourselves as being the open, listening and pleasant people we are, with the democratic mindset we all have. And such people do not scold or punch, but instead continuously present their arguments in a matter-of-fact way (Oct. 19, 05).

This issue is addressed repeatedly as the case moves towards a climax:

Even though I now inform [you] about this letter, this doesn't mean I want everyone on this list to get angry and agitated. Quite the contrary, I urge you to keep calm. Take it very calmly, in fact. There is nothing these people would like more than angry activists (Oct. 24, 05).

During Phase 4 it also becomes clear that the core group is practicing behind-the-scene mailing parallel to the email list. This first becomes apparent when one of those involved forwards an email which initially was written only to the core group. In the email it says, among other things, *«...then I wonder if it actually would be polite to mediate information about this initiative to everyone on the Byen Vår list, because it can easily be interpreted as though we are excluding some people...»* (Oct. 18, 05). The reason for this behind-the-scene mailing is presented in a later email:

Ideally however, we should dare to discuss this type of question on *byen@uib.no* – and not just between a few selected people. Meanwhile, we don't know each other, and if one is unsure, one wants most of all to first discuss ideas with those one knows (Oct. 22, 05).

During this period there are eight new writers on the list, two being especially active, with more than five emails each. Only three of the earlier writers contribute more than five emails in this period.

Phase 5: Policy formation

The last period, after the city council rejects the contract, starts out with extensive activity on the email list, including entries where the activists congratulate each other over the victory. Thereafter, the theme arises as to whether the activists are responsible for providing an alternative to the Clear Channel contract. This discussion is partly triggered by an editorial in Bergens Tidende, saying, *«Now we anticipate the protestors will come up with an alternative. Thus far alternatives have been status quo; continued littering and locked public toilets»* (Nyberg 2005, translated).⁹ The discussion also arises

⁸ This proved to not be an empty threat. After the contract with Clear Channel was cancelled, the company sued Bergen Municipality, but lost the court case.

⁹ During the entire period of activism, the editorial column in Bergens Tidende consistently supported the contract between Bergen Municipality and Clear Channel.

because the commissioner for urban development wants to meet the activist group in order to discuss future solutions. There are strong reactions to this now becoming the activist's responsibility.

Coinciding with this, the need intensifies to find out what the group actually is; «*We need to find out a little bit about who we are and what we want. It is not a given that we are a «we»*» (Oct. 26, 05). Some participants want a firmer structure around the network, yet others believe it should continue to function along the lines of a loose network. The manifold variety – the network's strength while working *against* the contract – now, when trying to find out what the network is *for*, becomes a weakness as well:

The engagement has thus been extensive and many-faceted. Now, as we are invited to participate in developing ideas, I believe this great variety is one of Byen Vår's greatest strengths. Even so, there is an inherent danger that it will lead to internal friction, what is more, it is unclear what this «internal» is. (Oct. 28, 05)

The question about clicks also comes to full flower now: «Hello everyone, just a few words about the community's solidarity: From my outside position, it looks like there are attempts to form clicks in Byen Vår, and some people are being overlooked. [...] A real democracy is not excluding but including» (Oct. 26, 05).

There are ten new writers on the list during this phase, i.e. after the case is «won».

Discussion

When examining the email list's total activity, we see that relatively few persons are active. 45 persons in total write entries on the email list during the entire period covered in our study. 20 write only one entry. Only eight people write ten or more emails: Seven of these are already active in the first phase, while the last one joins the list through a feature article she writes, and is later included in the core group. Meanwhile, two of the most ardent writers clearly stand on the sideline. Of the remaining six, three persons distinguish themselves as central, with 55, 45 and 34 entries respectively. That so few people are active on the list concurs with earlier research on Internet-based debate forums (Grönlund and Ranerup 2001). Email lists are however a participatory form necessitating a relatively large number of passive participants (Langner 2001). If everyone registered on the list was active, then the number of messages would be so high that interactive communication would collapse.

Particularly during the first and last phases, there are many entries by the two writers who stand on the sideline of the activist group's practical work – one writes long, «half-philosophical» arguments in support of the case, the other writes critical comments («*No, I am not in favour of Clear Channel being allowed entry. I am just so amazed over a group of individuals claimed to represent the breadth of Bergen's cultural life being so narrow minded about such a huge topic*», Oct. 10, 05). As was also expressed in the interviews, a problem with this type of debate forum is that it often attract people who want to discuss everything to the enth degree, and that often in such forums, it seems like whoever has the most time on their hands wins the debate (Informant #5). We also note that the two writers we talk about here participate in discussions in the beginning and ending phases, but have less to contribute to the more goal-oriented work.

The email list has first and foremost an internal function, that of delegating responsibility for concrete tasks. The list is not primarily used as a debate forum, but to mobilize, agree on who will do what, and to mediate arguments. The main point is not to discuss the issue, but to reverse a political decision. The emails revolve around whether one should write a feature article, should the article keep its present form, etc. The email list also contributed to restrain the activists. Through the email list the activists test out their debate contributions and feature articles, and practice a form of self-censure. Two aspects in particular are emphasized – to hold to facts and to keep calm. Internally, the email list is also used to hold the network together, and to map which resources the network can access: Who has knowledge about what? Who has the power to influence policy makers? Who has knowledge of political processes and decision-making procedures? And who is best suited to try to influence this or that person or group?

The group characterizes itself as a «do-ocracy». There are consultations, but thereafter each individual does what he or she thinks is best. For the most part, therefore, it entails «getting things done» (Informant #5). The group has neither a formal leader nor a fixed structure, but in practice, an inner core clearly takes on leader functions, e.g., only one person has control over what is posted on the website, and those who want to join the email network have to apply to one of two people.

The aspect of time and the tempo of communication are important factors in relation to using email lists; these are what make it such an effective information channel. There is no need to arrange meetings, for whenever one has time, one can present impromptu arguments or send out messages about things that need to be done. The email list records activity at all hours of the day and night. If someone, in the middle of the night, feels they have something to say, a message is sent: «I can't sleep. Instead I lay awake thinking about what I would say if I was a member of the Norwegian Labour party...» (Oct. 17, 05, 4:35 am). The email list also offers a kind of flexibility that allows participation by people who otherwise would have difficulty in attending fixed meetings: «Unfortunately I do not have the possibility to come to Café Opera in the middle of supertime, since I have little children and I should eat supper with them» (Sep. 24, 05). Yet this does not hinder the sender from participating in the discussion and sharing her viewpoints with others on the list.

Concluding remarks

In this paper we have analysed how the Internet-based activist group Byen Vår used new information and communication technologies in order to mobilize, inform and influence a concrete political decision. One key assumption has been that the type of organization has significance for how ICT are used.

We have seen that in its period of activism, Byen Vår used new ICT in purposeful and rational ways, inasmuch as this was an ad hoc network with clear goals for achieving a political outcome. Yet they were not the only means used: There were also frequent uses of good, old fashioned technologies, e.g., telephone calls to politicians and other key actors were critical, or a synthesis of solutions, such as when videos and placards

were posted on the website. The activists also wrote to newspapers and worked in traditional ways to sway opinions and key decision makers. Physical meetings between the activists were also important, not least in order to establish trust. The core group and the behind-the-scenes mailing list function well, precisely because they have met each other (Informant #5).

In this analysis we have particularly focused on the network's website and email list use. During the period of study the website had an important function in relation to the outside world and politicians. It was simply designed, precisely because its makers wanted it to have a wide appeal and to seem as though it arose from the grassroots of society. The contents functioned to bring people together, in the sense that no information was presented that would offend any group. The website did not open up for discussing the issue or for mobilizing to direct action.

The email list gave a rapid flow of information, the feeling of a flat structure and of being with like-minded. Yet the email list functioned only partly as a debate forum and mostly dealt with matters of mobilization. It was largely used to delegate concrete tasks and to formulate arguments that could tip the balance in the protestors' favour. Through the email list, activists could mobilize activism and quickly inform about any new turn of events.

We also see that communication via Internet function well as long as the activists work *against* something. As soon as the focus turns and becomes a matter of finding out what the group is *for*, the needs arise for meeting one another and for a more fixed structure. Whereas loose networks can accommodate individuals who represent only themselves – they represent something by virtue of their viewpoints and involvement – in traditional organizations, it is much more a matter of representing something collective. As such, it becomes important for the collective «we» to be more substantive and unified. This indicates that traditional voluntary organizations hardly can be based on ICT alone, while loosely organized networks to a greater extent can. The distinction between the ad hoc organization and traditional voluntary organizations was clearly demonstrated in the last mobilization phase, when Byen Vår was faced with the issue of forming its own policy. Then the «do-ocracy» malfunctioned and the need to meet one another face to face arose. The overall objective of the activist group was not to create debate about the Clear Channel issue, but to make politicians reverse their position. The group worked to achieve a specific goal. When the goal was achieved the network fell apart.

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