



# Does Cyberspace Benefit Social Movements?

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## Introduction

Chiapas Zapatists in 1994, the Seattle battle in 1999 or the Peoples' summit on climate and Mother Earth's rights (Cochabamba) in 2010<sup>1</sup> are a few examples of social movements, which had in common the use of cyberspace. Diani defines a social movement as "networks of informal relations amidst a plurality of individuals, groups and organizations who share a distinct collective identity and mobilize resources on conflict-related topics, be they cultural or political"<sup>2</sup>. But how would cyberspace benefit these social movements? How do these movements use the space induced by cyberspace? And which challenges do they face? I will show here, that social movements use cyberspace, by presenting the tools it offers, its protestation space and its limits.

## I- An International Mobilization Vector

In general, information and communication technologies facilitate communication and information sharing<sup>3</sup>. Among those, are the obvious Facebook and Twitter, but also Skype, Youtube, websites, blogs, email, portable devices<sup>4</sup>, etc. Even China, despite its great firewall, has developed its own media<sup>5</sup>.

Cyberspace allows national and international mobilization, helps logistic organization and contributes to social movement financing. In the case of the Zapatists in Chiapas, Internet was "an important tool in the spreading of information and support organization at an international scale"<sup>6</sup>. In fact, social movements use the Internet to better coordinate and uphold mobilization efforts<sup>7</sup>. Finally, these movements can use the Internet as a means to finance itself<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> AGUITON, Christophe and al. "De Seattle à Cochabamba", *Mouvements*, vol. 3, no. 63, 2010, pp.7-10.

<sup>2</sup> DIANI, Mario. "Social Movement Networks Virtual and Real", *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2010, pp.386-401. See also: DIANI, Mario. "The concept of social movement", *Sociological Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1992, p.13.

<sup>3</sup> IRVING, Catherine J. and Leona M. ENGLISH. "Community in Cyberspace : Gender, Social Movement Learning, and the Internet", *Adult education quarterly* [0741-7136], vol. 61, no. 3, 2011, p.263.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* See also: MEEK, David. "YouTube and Social Movements: A Phenomenological Analysis of Participation, Events and Cyberspace", *Antipode*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2012, p.1436. GEORGE, Éric. "De l'utilisation d'Internet comme outil de mobilisation : les cas d'ATTAC et de SalAMP", *Sociologie et sociétés*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2000, p.176. FAHMI, Wael Salah. "Bloggers' street movement and the right to the city. (Re)claiming Cairo's real and virtual 'spaces of freedom'", *Environment and Urbanization*, vol. 21, no. 89, 2009, pp.90-91.

<sup>5</sup> VITASSE, Benjamin. "Facebook : Cap sur la Chine ?", *Mailclub.info*, article published on 21 December 2012, online: [www.mailclub.info/?facebook-cap-sur-la-chine,1737](http://www.mailclub.info/?facebook-cap-sur-la-chine,1737) (page visited on 12 February 2013).

<sup>6</sup> FROEHLING, Oliver. "The Cyberspace "War of Ink and Internet" in Chiapas, Mexico", *Geographical Review*, vol. 87, no. 2, 1997, p.291.

<sup>7</sup> VAN LAER, Jeroen and Peter VAN AELST. "Internet and Social Movement Action Repertoires – Opportunities and Limitations", *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 13, no. 8, pp.1152-1153. See also: PORTA, Donatella Della and Lorenzo MOSCA. "Global- net for Global Movements? A Network of Networks for a Movement of Movements", *Journal of Public Policy*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2005, p.167.

Cyberspace enables marginalized groups to express themselves more easily<sup>9</sup>, as participation costs find themselves reduced<sup>10</sup>. Thus, Internet increases the scope of social movements<sup>11</sup>.

## II- A Space for Free Speech

From the beginning of the Zapatist movement, activists turned to the Internet to organize discussion forums<sup>12</sup>. Cyberspace then turned into an information-sharing tool for demonstrators and scholars<sup>13</sup>. This exchange place enabled formal and informal education, especially among adults<sup>14</sup>. The Internet also plays a part in raising awareness for social causes. In addition, the Internet's capabilities have enabled the creation of alternative media, including *Indymedia*, which was created during the Seattle protests (1995)<sup>15</sup>.

Through the creation of forums, cyberspace allows for the sharing of values, individual rights and liberties<sup>16</sup>. The Internet can be seen as a “democratic space, due to its decentralized, composite and open network nature”<sup>17</sup>. It then appears as a tool for equality and democratization<sup>18</sup>. But cyberspace can also have the opposite effect. It can, for instance, foster authoritarianism, apply control over citizens, through surveillance mechanisms, contribute to single-thought societies and therefore restrain freedom of expression as in China<sup>19</sup>, among other places.

Cyberspace can take the shape of a protestation space, where social movements deploy activities such as petitions or massive mail sending<sup>20</sup>. The space taken over by movements generates new protestation<sup>21</sup> spaces, where dissension can be channelled<sup>22</sup>. New technologies bring militants and organizations closer to each other by increasing and facilitating exchanges<sup>23</sup>. In other words, cyberspace represents an alternative place for identity expression and the constitution of international solidarity.

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STOECKER, Randy. “Cyberspace vs. Face-to-Face: Community Organizing in the New Millennium”, *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2002, p.151.

<sup>8</sup> VAN LAER, Jeroen and Peter VAN AELST. *Loc. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> BELTON, Kristy A. “From Cyberspace to Offline Communities: Indigenous Peoples and Global Connectivity”, *Alternatives*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2010, p.197.

<sup>10</sup> KLEIN, Hans K. “Tocqueville in Cyberspace: Using the Internet for Citizen Associations”, *Information Society*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1999, p.219. See also: OLLITRAULT, Sylvie. “De la caméra à la pétition-web : le répertoire médiatique des écologistes”, *Réseaux*, vol. 17, no. 98, 1999, p.165. DIANI, Mario. “Social Movement Networks Virtual and Real”, *Op. cit.*, p.388.

<sup>11</sup> FROEHLING, Oliver. *Op. cit.*, p.292. See also: MARTIN, Brigitte. “Le cyber-activisme des Zapatistes”, master thesis, Québec, Faculté des études supérieures, Université de Laval, 1998, p.4. VAN LAER, Jeroen and Peter VAN AELST. *Op. cit.*, p.1147.

<sup>12</sup> MARTINEZ-TORRES, Marie Elena. “Civil Society, the Internet, and the Zapatistas”, *Peace Review*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2001, p.352.

<sup>13</sup> BELTON, Kristy A. *Op. cit.*, p.199. See also: FROEHLING, Oliver. *Op. cit.*, p.296.

<sup>14</sup> IRVING, Catherine J. and Leona M. ENGLISH. *Loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> VAN LAER, Jeroen and Peter VAN AELST. “Internet and Social Movement Action Repertoires – Opportunities and Limitations”, *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 13, no. 8, p.1158.

<sup>16</sup> KLEIN, Hans K. *Op. cit.*, p.213.

<sup>17</sup> GEORGE, Éric. *Op. cit.*, p.174.

<sup>18</sup> FROEHLING, Oliver. *Op. cit.*, p.293. See also: OLLITRAULT, Sylvie. *Op. cit.*, pp.153-185. KLEIN, Hans K. *Loc. cit.*. STOECKER, Randy. *Op. cit.*, p.147.

<sup>19</sup> VITASSE, Benjamin. *Loc. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> VAN LAER, Jeroen and Peter VAN AELST. *Op. cit.*, p.1147.

<sup>21</sup> FAHMI, Wael Salah. *Loc. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> SULLIVAN, Jonathan and Lei XIE. “Environmental Activism, Social Networks and the Internet”, *The China Quarterly*, vol. 198, 2009, p.422.

<sup>23</sup> BELTON, Kristy A. *Loc. cit.* See also: DIANI, Mario. *Op. cit.*, p.395.

### III- Which Challenges for Social Movements?

Proulx speaks of a “virtual community”<sup>24</sup> to designate relations within cyberspace, but what is it really? Individual activism and one-off engagements<sup>25</sup> highlight social movements in cyberspace’s incapacity to create long-lasting links between activists<sup>26</sup>. While it is easy to attract a large number of people around a movement in a short period of time, the weakness of those links leads to their quick decay<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, it remains difficult to establish whether the experience of direct communication can be compared to “cyber-relations”<sup>28</sup>.

Several authors raise the question of the Internet’s accessibility: who can afford surfing on the web<sup>29</sup> and how many inhabitants of poor countries or areas have access to cyberspace<sup>30</sup>? Even if the Internet’s cost of use is rather low, the purchase of a computer is necessary, as is the maintenance and capacity to use it<sup>31</sup>. The digital gap stresses the uneven Internet access between developing and developed countries<sup>32</sup>.

In the real world, and in the immaterial one, where does freedom of expression stop? Even if cyberspace represents a playground for free speech, that area is neither a right nor an obligation. This judicial void allows for a space where anyone can share information without having to identify himself<sup>33</sup>. One can therefore observe the importance of being able to create trusting relationships and guaranteeing the authors’ credibility, among others, for the financing of social movements’ activities<sup>34</sup>.

### Conclusion

In 1994, when Zapatists occupied cyberspace, nobody predicted that social movements would benefit this new space. Today, despite certain limits, militants around the world have found how to draw an advantage of it, as a tool and as a forum to claim into. The Internet has therefore enabled the bettering of traditional forms of activism<sup>35</sup>. Several authors, including Lessig<sup>36</sup>, focus on the problem of regulating cyberspace and consider that freedom of expression will have to evolve in the coming years, towards a new interpretation of authors’ rights, currently left behind by Internet practices, or towards the multiplication of platforms and expression modes. Until then, cyberspace remains unavoidable for social movements.

24 PROULX, Serge and Guillaume LATZKO-TOTH. “La virtualité comme catégorie pour penser le social : l’usage de la notion de communauté virtuelle”, *Sociologie et sociétés*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2000, pp.99-122.

25 OLLITRAULT, Sylvie. *Op. cit.*, p.167.

26 VAN LAER, Jeroen and Peter VAN AELST. *Op. cit.*, p.1146.

27 *Id.*, p.1163.

28 DIANI, Mario. *Op. cit.*, p.391.

29 FROEHLING, Oliver. *Op. cit.*, p.292.

30 STOECKER, Randy. *Op. cit.*, p.151.

31 KLEIN, Hans K. *Op. cit.*, p.219.

32 VAN LAER, Jeroen and Peter VAN AELST. *Op. cit.*, p.1160.

33 BELTON, Kristy A. *Op. cit.*, p.198.

34 IRVING, Catherine J. and Leona M. ENGLISH. *Op. cit.*, pp.264;269.

35 STOECKER, Randy. *Op. cit.*, p.155. See also: OLLITRAULT, Sylvie. *Op. cit.*, pp.153-185.

36 LESSIG, Lawrence. Code version 2.0, New York, Basic Books, 2006, 410p.