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The Internet and the Seattle WTO Protests

Matthew Eagleton-Pierce

As the Internet's structure and scale have evolved, various forms of social justice activism have become more prominent, challenging and altering the landscape of political discourse and advocacy. The Internet's potential for social justice campaigning has been appreciated for at least a decade, although in recent years activists have increasingly targeted international structures, institutions and treaties. In particular, a range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has addressed the politics of international trade as a notably contentious subject. Nowhere else was this opposition more publicly vented than at the recent World Trade Organization (WTO) summit, held in Seattle in late 1999. Although Seattle is remembered as a triumphant moment in modern popular protest, with widespread reporting by the world media, it also marked an important watershed for Internet-mediated activism.

It is crucial to understand the making of Seattle through cyberspace because it offers an example of future social justice action. For instance, how was the Internet used as a campaign tool by activists? How did the Internet affect relations between activists? What alternative protest strategies did the Internet offer?

From the postponing of the opening ceremony to the declaration of martial law and the firing of tear gas and rubber bullets, between 40,000 and 50,000 protesters took to the Seattle streets to oppose WTO power and practices. This resistance, both focused and dispersed, may have seemed like a spontaneous movement when seen through the mass media lens. In truth, preparations had started months prior to the summit, with considerable mobilization conducted through the Internet. From the tens of thousands who protested, a handful of NGOs were influential in coordinating the activism. These groups included Third World Network, Corporate Europe Observatory, the Direct Action Network (DAN), Independent Media Center (IMC), the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Focus on the Global South, the Ruckus Society and trade union organizations from the United States, Canada, Mexico and Korea.

All these groups campaigned against a range of social, economic and environmental injustices or helped co-ordinate actions with hundreds of smaller activist organizations. For example, Corporate Europe Observatory provided important links between trans-national firms and U.S. or European trade negotiators, while the DAN, a non-hierarchical coalition of thousands, trained and assigned protesters through affinity groups and successfully prevented the conference from

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beginning. Others, such as the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, based in Minneapolis, established a major rallying point at WTOWatch.org, while grassroots media activists established the Independent Media Center to cover IMC events from the barricades, streaming video, images, radio and text direct to the Internet. In addition, two long-established NGOs with specific global trade divisions, London-based Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) and Washington DC-based Public Citizen, were important in the Seattle movement. The actions of these two groups can be used to illustrate some of the most important aspects of Internet-mediated activism.

How does the Internet benefit social justice activism? There are common advantages to all groups, including access to extensive resources, a global reach, speed, networking and low costs. The use of both the Web and the discussion list, or listserv, are two key tools used to educate and organize action. For instance, FoEI had already appreciated the benefits of online relations with other facilitators, regional coordinators, and supporting collectives. Their website outlined objectives, activities, a short- and long-term campaign scope and links to contacts and other resources.

The WTO's position as global trade arbitrator, including its history and contemporary influence, was featured in a selection of fact sheets and essays. In addition, FoEI was important in establishing a Web-based Stop the Millennium Round Statement, signed by 1,500 activist groups world-wide, three times their initial expectation. At the same time, Public Citizen constructed two designated mobilization websites: SeattleWTO.org and Seattle99.org. As well as educating, these websites linked activists with hosts in Seattle offering accommodation, guaranteeing affordable housing for hundreds of protesters.

Beyond the collection of resources provided by FoEI and Public Citizen, the websites offered volumes of information for activists to assist their preparations, such as local media sources or intergovernmental and governmental reports. Besides using websites, FoEI, Public Citizen and Corporate Europe Observatory collaborated to moderate a critical communication channel, a listserv named StopWTORound. This discussion list was vital in helping to build coalitions, keeping participants informed and reaching out to potential activists, some of whom may have faced local criticism if their involvement in Seattle became public knowledge.

Similarly, Public Citizen ran a series of listservs, WTO-HOST, for local correspondence; TW-LIST, for national mobilization; and WTO-INTL, the international discussion list. In addition, the MAI-NOT and MAI-STOP listservs, used in the opposition to the Multilateral Agreement of Investment in 1997, continued to operate as attention gradually shifted to the Seattle summit.

Both these tools, the website and the listserv, were successfully harnessed by activists in preparing for Seattle. The strongest attribute of the Web interface is its capability to connect information, places and organizations that are mediated by a range of social practices and institutions. In many respects, and particularly in facilitating a space for counter-hegemonic discourses, the website enhances the group's credibility and their argument's persuasiveness. The Web has changed

producer and consumer relations and the power systems that underlie such knowledge flows.

In the case of Seattle, we can see how the traditional media power structures were contested by a "shadow media" of activists who published events in depth. Two groups in particular, IMC and WTOWatch.org, were important during the summit in providing alternative information sources. For instance, IMC adopted a decentralized and uncensored approach by offering opportunities for activists to post their protest experiences on Web bulletin boards, while WTOWatch.org streamed live broadcasts of symposiums and meetings surrounding the official event.

Meanwhile, the listserv operated as a key social nexus for the cyber-activist, opening the potential for efficient, focused many-to-many interactions and discussions. While activists challenged media accounts of the Seattle protests, there were variations on the broadcast model used, from more centralized media control at Public Citizen to open counter-broadcasts by IMC. If the listserv is represented as a democratic technology, with low barriers to entry and no restrictions on redistribution, it should serve the interests of all. But the moderating of listservs, by those who maintain and administrate them, reminds us of fundamental issues about who directs the message and about broader concerns of power relations within Internet-mediated activism.

A founding concept of the Internet argues that it is inherently anti-hierarchical, a decentered system, seemingly without central power controls. Many NGOs that participated at Seattle, such as FoEI and Public Citizen, tend to favor an egalitarian culture of networking, consultation and consensus building, rather than a culture of competition and hierarchy. Often, groups appear to lack structure and the ability to organize without formal steering committees**.** Yet at the same time FoEI and Public Citizen were mobilizing with other collectives around the world, they were also communicating internally with other core groups.

For instance, between FoEI and Public Citizen a smaller restricted E-mail system, frequent conference calls and the organizing of occasional international meetings, were used. This framework highlights the importance of trust within Internet-mediated activism. How do you facilitate clear lines of reporting and responsibility with individuals you have never met? The dynamics of trust can be illustrated by the moderating of broader online communications, principally within discussion lists. Screening and influencing the content of Internet communications is particularly important, especially when preparing operations for a global event like Seattle.

For example, FoEI was forced to "discreetly drop" xenophobic parties who were associating themselves with the Seattle protests. Meanwhile, Public Citizen generally kept communication through listservs unmoderated and intimate. However, one exception was the StopWTORound discussion list, jointly moderated by FoEI, Public Citizen and Corporate Europe Observatory. In addition, a separate quote by Lori Wallach, Director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, confirms this tendency of influential groups to seek a high degree of accountability with a well-worn strategy seemingly unaffected by the Internet:

> The real organizing for the "No New Round Turnaround" campaign culminating in Seattle was face to face. It's people I've been meeting with three to four times a year, from around the world, since 1992.

There are widespread claims that the Internet's decentered, anti-hierarchical organization is compatible with decentered, anti-hierarchical activism. This myth is a major pillar of the Internet and can be traced back to the early history of the ARPANET network in the mid-1960s, the first major component of cyberspace. One of the key goals of ARPANET was providing a robust, decentralized but still hierarchical command that would survive a nuclear attack**.** This underlying fabric remains intact within the modern Internet: attempts to restrict spaces can be evaded, treating conflict like nuclear damage. Nevertheless, this argument seems to be based, at least partially, on a technologically determinist position. In two ways the importance of trust is exposed within virtual hierarchies: issues of identity and many-to-many communications.

First, the construction of identity has notable ambiguous effects on Internet hierarchy. In one sense, traditional power relations appear to be disturbed, but the subversion of hierarchy does not mean that Internet activism lacks hierarchy. Rather, new, reconstituted hierarchies emerge. Moreover, these virtual hierarchies are closely tied with the identity construction of leading actors. In other words, does understanding the politics of international trade denote a higher level of professional expertise or education? What is the justification for excluding individuals from the process of decision-making? This is not to suggest that all opposing views to FoEI and Public Citizen were ignored. Rather, it illuminates how the dynamics of leadership are expressed, even when not explicitly stated.

Second, associated with identity is the impact online communications have on many-to-many communications. To an extent, the Internet has overcome forms of discrimination against individuals and enabled those who were marginalized to participate in the governing decision-making process. For instance, the Internet eliminates physical constraints such as rallying conference centers. However, as even a casual participant in online decision-making will appreciate, the use of many-to-many discussions can be a long process. Once again, online hierarchies mirror offline hierarchies: important decisions are handled by a few actors, not least because many are receiving rather than actively participating.

Besides the traditional social activist use of the Internet, alternative modes of protest have emerged in the last three years. An example is "hacktivist" protest strategies. Hacktivism describes activists who draw on their computer skills to make political statements and actions. Its origins can be traced to the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (EDT) in a campaign against the Mexican and U.S. governments, an action that drew attention to the war against the Zapatistas. The group produced software called FloodNet, designed to "flood" or block a target website by repeatedly requesting the same page. On September 9, 1998, EDT estimated 10,000 people participated in a virtual sit-in of the websites of Mexican President Zedillo and the U.S. Pentagon, delivering 600,000 hits per minute to each site.

The techniques of EDT are now well known on the Internet. At the moment,

social justice campaigners can deploy a range of hacktivist strategies to further their causes. In particular, there was evidence of a subtler form of hacktivism at the Seattle summit. The actions of a U.S.-based collective, RTMark, provides an illuminating comparison to established NGOs such as FoEI and Public Citizen.

According to their website, RTMark "benefits from 'limited liability' just like any other corporation" and uses this status to support "the sabotage (information alteration) of corporate products." The group tries to remain small, mobile and alert: there are probably three core members, spread across the U.S., with no central headquarters. Seeking cultural, rather than financial profit, the group has used satire and hacktivist techniques to advertise social inequalities.

RTMark's opposition to the WTO was achieved subtly without having a physical presence at Seattle. During the summit, the WTO used its official website—www.wto.org—to offer trade-related literature, a moderated discussion room, and webcasts of symposiums between delegates and NGOs. At the same time, RTMark used a domain name they purchased—www.gatt.org—to launch a parody website, World Trade Organization (WTO)/GATT Home Page, incorporating similar design features and material from the official WTO website. For instance, RTMark mimicked the WTO logo, copied graphic hyperlinks that alluded to trade topics such as environment, and used quotes from and events concerning Director-General Michael Moore and other trade officials. Despite the initial mixture of confusion and clarification, gatt.org provided a series of links to groups opposing the multilateral organization. However, this virtual parody did not go unnoticed by the WTO, which issued the following, rather anxious press release on the eve of the summit.

> WTO DG Moore deplores fake WTO websites:
> They "undermine WTO transparency" … I am deeply concerned about the recent appearance of anonymous websites that copy important design features of the WTO's official websites. This causes confusion among visitors looking for genuine information from the WTO, disrupting a much-needed democratic dialogue. It's illegal and it's unfair to those who have a genuine case in criticizing the WTO, an organization that only functions with the authority of sovereign governments.

Despite the publicity that RTMark generated, it is difficult to assess the overall effectiveness and legality of this Web-based political parody. First, by recasting the language and images of the WTO, RTMark were successful in scripting their presentation of the WTO's supposed transparency. Second, RTMark's efforts were given greater attention by the media coverage, both print and electronic, following the WTO's press release. One could conclude that the effectiveness of this strategy depends not only on computer skills and techniques but also in the marketing to the widest possible audience. Third, and most importantly, are the legal challenges this particular hacktivist strategy provokes. While RTMark have been successful in exploiting unclear property laws, domain name and intellectual disputes are growing ever more frequent in cyberspace.

Recently, various legislative efforts from powerful bodies, such as the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), have been attempting to prohibit using domain names that could confuse people about the origin of the site. It remains unclear whether such proposals would be considered a barrier to freedom of speech on the Internet and due to these legal uncertainties, the

technical skills involved, and the risks of losing reputation and financial standing, most NGOs would not consider this form of hacktivism as a viable Internet-mediated protest. Nevertheless, the Internet provides a veil of anonymity and the members of RTMark have always disguised their identities.

Does the Internet represent a new frontier for social justice activism? Several perspectives can be offered. First, as Seattle proved, the Internet is a tremendous tool for educating and organizing. It provides permanent and updated information points, facilitates instantaneous communication in restricted and open forms, is global in scope, and is relatively inexpensive. There is no question that access to this information is a precondition for many activist struggles and that the Internet provides a great advantage. It is less apparent whether information will in itself lead to appropriate decisions and the political action to carry them out. Above all, the Internet's anarchy and decentralized architecture suits the relationships activists wish to foster.

From a second perspective, the frontier looks somewhat different. In the off-line world, those leading actors who have greater capital—financial, social or intellectual—appear to be reconstituted in similar cyber-political relations. The willingness of minority parties to accept agendas within these relations is difficult to estimate. More identifiable, however, are those activists without any Internet access or the expertise to participate. As the Internet matures and cyberactivism becomes a normal component of protest, it remains to be seen how influential certain representatives may become. Yet, a third perspective views the frontier as a vibrant and diverse landscape.

In understanding the Internet's potential, alternative protest strategies have already challenged traditional activist methods, but while such approaches may be innovative and subversive, the legality and ethics of protesting this way remain debatable. Future research should therefore include a closer examination of the negotiation processes involved in Internet-mediated activism, as well as the impact of disruptive forms of hacktivism.

It should also be recognized that when the authorities see risks on the new frontier, they act swiftly to limit them and foster a more predictable space. Indeed, in the "real" world, the WTO has attempted to achieve just that. Learning from the "Battle in Seattle," it announced in February 2001 that the Fourth WTO Ministerial Conference would be held in Doha, Qatar, a state renowned for oppressive responses against demonstrations. What one can say for sure is that the frontier of cyberspace will remain as contested as the frontiers in "real" space.

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