Green Culture

An A-to-Z Guide

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Toward a Sustainable Future

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See Also: Corporate Green Culture; Environmental "Goods"; Global Warming and Culture; International Law and Treaties.

Further Readings

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CYBER ACTION

Cyber action or cyberactivism, the use of digital technologies and the Internet for social change, was one of the most important political innovations of the final decade of the 20th century and continues to play a key role in contemporary environmental and other movements. Cyberactivism enables activists to build global alliances and networks, linking diverse local struggles with their counterparts elsewhere. It facilitates the transnational flow of information and resources, helps activists organize local and global actions, and provides a medium for developing new protest tactics. Particular cyberactivist tools and practices include the use of electronic list serves and websites, local/global networking, electronic civil disobedience, culture jamming and guerrilla communication, temporary media centers and hacklabs, and web-based alternative media. Environmentalists have been at the forefront in the development and use of cyberactivism, which has achieved particular visibility with the rise of the global justice movement.

History and Context

Environmental and other social justice groups started using electronic newsgroups and e-mail in the late 1980s, taking to the World Wide Web in the early 1990s. More established organizations such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace primarily used the web for advertising and outreach, although more radical environmental organizations such as Earth First! and the UK-based Reclaim the Streets soon began using e-mail, list serves, and

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websites for networking and coordination of anti-road and other direct action protests. In the mid-1990s, the Zapatistas and their transnational network of supporters made high-profile use of the Internet to circulate information about their plight and the ongoing human rights situation in Chiapas, weaving together an "electronic fabric of struggle." Some of the earliest denial-of-service attacks against opponents' websites were employed against the Mexican government during this period, providing a model for subsequent electronic civil disobedience in conjunction with global justice protests.

Environmental and other anti–corporate globalization activists soon began using e-mail, listservs, and websites to plan and coordinate global days of action against institutions such as the G8, World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF). The June 1999 Carnival against Capitalism, when activists targeted London and other global financial centers to protest the G8 meeting in Birmingham, and the anti-WTO protests in Seattle that November were important milestones in the use of the Internet to organize global protests. These mass global actions, which continued through-out the next decade in cities such as Quebec, Genoa, and Barcelona, and most recently in Copenhagen against the December 2009 Global Climate Summit, also provided platforms for developing and experimenting with other forms of cyberactivism: culture jamming against corporate targets, the creation of the Independent Media Center (IMC, or Indymedia), and the building of temporary media centers and hacklabs. Environmental and other social justice activists have also begun to use new social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter to share information and coordinate and mobilize for actions.

Local/Global Networking

Cyberactivism has been perhaps used to greatest effect as a tool for sharing resources, communicating, and coordinating at multiple scales. The Internet has allowed small groups of activists with limited resources to reach out beyond their local struggles to build wider regional and global connections. This flexible, decentralized mode of organization resonates with the anarchist ideals of many radical environmental activists. Mass global justice actions have been organized through a global web of list serves and websites, while activists have also used e-mail to share logistical information about meetings, protests, and activities; hold strategic debates; and exchange information about mobilizations and events. In addition, activists have used interactive web pages during mobilizations to pro-vide information, resources, and links; post documents and calls to action; and house real-time chats. Particular networks and more traditional organizations have their own permanent websites, which they use for publicity, outreach, and mobilization. For exam-ple, Greenpeace developed an online Cyber Center in order to forge a global community of resistance to environmental destruction, which has coordinated campaigns such as the Corporate 100 actions against global warming.

Electronic Civil Disobedience

Electronic civil disobedience (ECD) brings together activists and programmers in the devel-opment of new forms of direct action in cyberspace. Initially conceived by the Critical Art Ensemble collective as a tool to allow small groups of highly skilled digital artists, activists, and techies to achieve political goals by making innovative and strategic use of the Internet, ECD has since become more popular and mass based. Electronic Disturbance Theater first

used ECD as a mass tactic in support of the Zapatistas in 1998, organizing virtual sit-ins against the Mexican government to protest the war on the Zapatistas. Floodnet software facilitates these actions by allowing participants to click on a link, sending them to a targeted website along with thousands of others, overloading the server. Collectives such as the electrohippies have since organized ECD actions in conjunction with numerous global justice and environmental protests.

In addition to virtual sit-ins, these mobilizations have also included bombarding target servers and websites with e-mails, leaving behind ironic messages or "electronic graffiti," and "hijacking," or redirecting, surfers to mock sites. For example, activists built the clone "World Trade Organization/GATT Home Page" during the anti-WTO protests in Seattle featuring mock quotes by then–WTO Director-General Mike Moore. Environmental organizations such as Greenpeace have made creative use of similar digital tactics. In June 2000, Greenpeace activists installed a webcam at the end of an underwater radioactive discharge pipe run by the French nuclear agency Cogema in order to provide live documentation. The images were broadcast on the web and at the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic in Copenhagen. Visitors to the Greenpeace website could also send real-time messages to conference delegates. As a result, the convention called on France and the United Kingdom to end their nuclear reprocessing activities.

Culture Jamming/Guerrilla Communication

Culture jamming refers to the playful parodying of corporate advertisements and logos to generate alternative messages that challenge corporate power. Pirating billboards, ironic graffiti, and altering websites are all specific instances of culture jamming. The Canadian-based *Adbusters* magazine and the associated Media Foundation provide online commentary and multimedia resources that local participants can download to facilitate their participation in anticorporate campaigns such as the international Buy Nothing Day. Guerrilla communication is a related practice involving the creative juxtaposition of incommensurate elements to generate subversive meanings. Guerrilla communication uses paradox to shatter tacitly accepted notions and to open a space for alternative formulations. Culture jamming and guerrilla communication make use of the old Situationist strategy of *détournement*, which takes well-known phrases, images, and ideas from mass culture out of context and gives them an unexpected twist, or detour, in order to create surprising, often playful combinations.

Environmental direct action organizations have employed culture jamming and guerrilla communication tactics as part of their anticorporate campaigns. For example, before the Sydney Olympics in 2000, Greenpeace developed the spoof website Coke Spotlight (Coca-Cola was an Olympic sponsor) to highlight the company's use of greenhouse gases in their refrigerants. One of the images on the site featured the traditional "Enjoy Coke" logo, which was modified to read "Enjoy Climate Change." A month after the site went live, the Coca-Cola Company committed to phasing out greenhouse gases. As with ECD, culture jamming and guerrilla communication tactics are largely symbolic, achieving victories by generating mass media attention. However, they also form part of a wider cyber-activist culture that involves the creative use of new digital technologies, decentralized coordination, the free and open exchange of ideas and information, and the combination and recombination of software and cultural codes.

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Indymedia

Web-based independent media represents another key terrain of cyberactivist practice. Grassroots activists have long relied on small-scale alternative news sources and 'zines to get the word out about their organizations and activities, but the web greatly facilitates these efforts, providing a low-cost means for cheaply and quickly producing and distributing publications. Environmentalists were among the first to make use of new digital technologies in this way, as mainstream organizations developed electronic newsletters while more radical networks such as Earth First! created their own online 'zines. However, it was the emergence of Indymedia that revolutionized web-based alternative media. The first IMC was established during the anti-WTO protest in Seattle, where independent journalists reported directly from the streets, while activists in Seattle and beyond uploaded their own text and image files. The network quickly expanded into a global alternative communications network involving multimedia platforms composed of electronic print, video, audio, and photography. The global network now has more than 200 local sites and receives two million page views per day.

Local Indymedia collectives are organized along decentralized, nonhierarchical lines, involving consensus decision making, autonomous working groups, and horizontal coordination. The global Indymedia process is similarly managed through a series of transnational editorial, technical, and logistical working groups, which communicate through global e-mail lists and periodic web meetings via Internet Relay Chat technology. Central to Indymedia's organization and philosophy is open publishing software, an innovative technical system that allows activists to create and distribute their own news stories. However, as Indymedia expands—and along with it, the number and diversity of contributions, including increasing spam and racist, sexist, and/or irrelevant posts—many activists see a growing need to develop mechanisms for shaping and controlling content. Finding a balance between openness and quality remains one of the most significant challenges facing Indymedia.

Temporary Media Centers and Hacklabs

Environmental activists were also pioneers in establishing temporary media centers and computer labs to provide Internet access and digital networking tools during mass direct actions. UK-based activists created a mobile office to support anti-roads and quarry and tree protection protests during the late 1990s. At around the same time, tactical media activists and squatters began building temporary media and "hack" labs to provide physical spaces for digital networking, technological experimentation, and the free exchange of information. These experiences provided models for the later development of Independent Media Centers and temporary computer labs during global justice mobilizations.

For example, the alternative media zone established during the July 2002 Strasbourg No Border Camp, ironically called "Silicon Valley," housed an IMC, Internet café, radio tent, web-based news and radio, and a double-decker media bus called the Publix Theater Caravan, which itself offered video screening, Internet access and streaming, and a bar and lounge. The Internet café and the entire zone were outfitted with a WiFi connection, and the radio tent was equipped with a 50-watt transmitter that generated simultaneous netcasts. Cyberactivists have built similar media labs during regional and World Social Forums. During the November 2002 European Social Forum in Strasbourg, the "Euraction Hub Project" provided an open space for sharing ideas and experiences, experimenting

with digital technologies, carrying out autonomous actions, and organizing in a horizontal and participatory fashion. In this sense, temporary media centers and hacklabs do not simply provide digital tools—they also reflect the participatory, antihierarchical ethic of many radical activists.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Cyberactivism has provided an important tool for environmental, global justice, and other activists to pursue their goals of a more just, equitable, and sustainable world. The Internet and related online digital technologies have allowed activists to build networks that are locally rooted, yet globally connected, to carry out novel forms of electronic civil disobedience, to develop and implement innovative culture jamming and guerrilla communication campaigns, to build more effective alternative media projects, and to provide technical support for mass gatherings and actions through temporary computer centers and hacklabs. At the same time, cyberactivism has also allowed activists to generate organizational practices and forms and to experiment with new technologies that reflect their broader political cultures and egalitarian ideals. Most recently, cyberactivists have taken to new digital media, including blogs, wikis, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. We still know little about these emerging practices and their impact, suggesting an important avenue for future research.

See Also: Blogs; Communication, Global and Regional; Communication, National and Local; Environmental Communication, Public Participation; Environmental Justice Movements.

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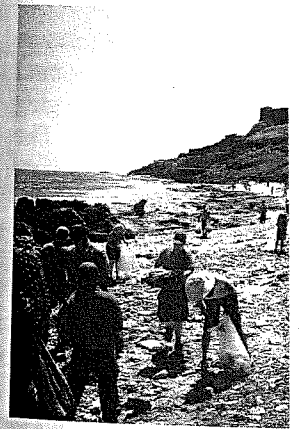
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