

## Internet Use and Global Activism at the United States Social Forum

**Elizabeth A. G. Schwarz**

University of California, Riverside

USA

eschw001@ucr.edu

### Abstract

In this study, I examine specific types of online tools as influential factors for several aspects of global social movement involvement. Social movement scholars highlight the ability of the internet to encourage global connectedness and global activism. Testing these hypotheses using survey data from the 2010 United States Social Forum, this study extends research exploring internet use and global social movement activity by examining activists' use of four different internet technologies as they relate to three facets of global activism. The empirical evidence offers some support that the use of communication tools influences being affiliated with international movements; however, this finding is moderated when controlling for other factors. In part, the findings challenge traditional notions of the relationship between internet use and global activism. This study offers a more nuanced understanding of how activists might use internet technologies to maintain their networks with other activists around the globe.

### Keywords

social movement; internet; global activism; social forum

### Exploring the Internet and the United States Social Forum

This study examines the relationship between internet use and global activism. Scholars argue that in general, the use of the internet increases local and global contacts (Hampton and Wellman 2001). Similarly, social movement scholars highlight the ability of internet technologies to encourage global connectedness and global activism. In particular, the global justice movement has been associated with use of the internet since the Zapatistas and the Battle in Seattle because of its nonhierarchical foundation, multi-issue focus, and loosely networked structures (Arquilla and Rodfeld 2001, Castells 2004, Kahn and Kellner 2004). Social movement activists developed the World Social Forum (WSF) in 2001 as an open space where activists who were resistant to the dominant globalization process could congregate and work together (Smith, Byrd, Reese, and Smythe 2012). The United States Social Forum (USSF) "interfaces with the wider WSF, integrating local, national, and regional experiences into a transnational process of experimentation with ideas, strategies, and methods for practicing global democracy" (Juris and Smith 2011 p. 284-285). As some scholars contend that the greatest proportional benefit of the internet may be for groups that are the most distant and the most intermittent (Walgrave, Bennett, Van Laer, and Breunig 2011), the relationship between the USSF and WSF makes the USSF an ideal setting to study internet use and global activism.

della Porta and Mosca (2005) focus on internet use by the movement for global justice. They maintain that the internet is seen as a sign of globalization and a way to spread information at a global level. The internet favors non-hierarchical forms of organization. The internet is a cheap, quick way of international communication that simplifies mobilization. The improved communication the internet provides may spur transnational organizing by encouraging the creation of coalitions and networks. The internet can strengthen identities and solidarities by increasing the rate of exchange between distant organizations and individuals (Diani 2000) and help maintain geographically distant face-to-face networks (Garrett 2006, Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). Fisher, Berman, and Neff (2005) maintain that organizations connect their members to transnational advocacy networks via the internet. They explain, "many local organizations involved in the globalization movement connect their members to transnational advocacy networks and coalitions via the internet" (p. 117).

However, other research questions the relationship between the internet and global activism. Analyzing 17 transnational organizations' websites, Van Aelst and Walgrave (2002) contend they

cannot say the movement is becoming a transnational social movement. Bedoyan, Van Aelst and Walgrave (2004) examine the composition of anti-neoliberal protesters and their presumed transnational character using a case study and survey at anti-neoliberal globalization protests during the EU summit in Brussels on December 14, 2001. They find use of the internet does not differentiate between foreign and Belgium demonstrators which they find surprising because internet use is typically emphasized when discussing transnational organizing. Kavada (2005) finds face-to-face contact coexists with mediated forms of mobilization in her analysis of the global social justice movement. She questions just how 'internet' the global justice movement is and wonders if "... it is more the case of a movement with an electronic spine - in terms of the connections among key activists across different countries - but whose day-to-day organizing and mobilization takes place locally and through face-to-face communication?" (p. 26).

While there is a large amount of literature looking at the internet and social movement activity, scholars call for research that looks at different media use patterns or different internet applications (Dimitrova et al. 2011, Kavada 2005). Kavada (2005) argues that researchers need to distinguish between the different internet applications, explaining that "bundling up all of these applications under the category 'Internet' cannot adequately capture the role of new communication technologies in social movement activity" (p. 27). This study examines communication, SNS, collaboration and multimedia-sharing technologies. This study extends research on social movements use of the internet for global activism by including four types of internet technologies as well as three measures of global activism.

## Methods

This study uses survey data from the 2010 USSF to examine internet use and global activism. This study draws from responses from 241 USSF attendees. The 50-question survey gathered information about respondents' demographic and socio-economic characteristics, political views, affiliations with organizations and social movements, and political activities. The three dependent variables I use in these analyses are *global movement identity*, *international contact*, and *international movements*. Global movement identity refers to whether or not the respondent said they considered themselves to be part of a global social movement. International contact refers to how often respondents contact someone outside of the United States for political purposes. Based on the median response, individuals who sometime, frequently, or sometimes contact someone outside the US were coded 1, as having high international contact while those who never or rarely contact someone outside the US were coded as 0. International movements refers to the number of movements respondents are involved in internationally.

The key independent variables are four types of internet tools. The four types of tools include: *communication*, *social network*, *collaboration*, and *multimedia sharing*. Responding to a question inquiring about the forms of online technologies and tools they use for political purposes, respondents indicated they used a specific technology by checking the specific responses: communication (e.g. blogs or email), social networking (e.g., Facebook), collaboration (e.g., wiki), or multimedia sharing (e.g. Flickr). Control variables include age, number of movements, number of organizations, gender, race, education, personal income, marriage, children, and employment status. The other dependent variables are also included in later models.

In order to test the hypotheses that certain online tools are related to having a global movement identity and international contact, I use logistic regressions. This study employs negative binomial regressions to examine the relationship between the use of different types of online technologies and involvement in international movements. I include three models for each dependent variable. First, I include a baseline model with only controls; next a model with controls and the internet tools; and finally, a model with the controls, internet tools, and the other dependent variables.

## Findings and Conclusion

Smith and Wiest (2012) maintain that, in part, the introduction of new technologies, including the internet, facilitated the increased role of social movement challengers at a global level. States no longer have a privileged role in global politics. This has “expanded the class diversity of those engaged in and attentive to global politics because it created new avenues for local and national groups to participate” (p. 168). This study offers a more nuanced understanding into how this process might work. The use of the four types of internet tools does not relate to making contact with people internationally or having a global movement identity. Instead, findings suggest that using communication tools is positively associated with being part of international movements. However, this relationship is moderated when controlling for the other global activism measures. The findings point to the important role communication technologies may play in the social forum process. While the results highlight the importance of exploring different types of internet tools, the findings also suggest it may be important to consider the entire media ecology in which movements are embedded to explore this topic further.

## References

- Bedoyan, I., Van Aelst, P. & S. Walgrave. 2004. “Limits and possibilities of transnational mobilization: the case of EU Summit protesters in Brussels.” *Mobilization* 9(1): 39-54.
- Bennett, W. 2003. “Communicating Global Activism.” *Information, Communication & Society* 6(2): 143-168.
- Diani, M. 2000. “Social Movement Networks Virtual and Real.” *Information, Communication & Society* 3(3): 386-401.
- Dimitrova, D., Shehata, A., Stromback, J., and Lars Nord. 2011. “The Effect of Digital Media on Political Knowledge and Participation in Election Campaigns: Evidence from Panel Data” *Communication Research: 1-24*.
- Fisher, D. R., Stanley, K., Berman, D. and G. Neff. 2005. “How do organizations matter? Mobilization and support for participants at five global protests.” *Social Problems* 52(1): 102-121.
- Garrett, R. K. 2006. “Protest in an Information Society: a review of literature on social movements and new ICTs.” *Information, Communication & Society* 9(2): 202–224.
- Juris, J. 2005. “The New Digital Media and Activist Networking within Anti-Corporate Globalization Movements.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 597: 189-208.
- Kavada, A. 2005. “Exploring the Role of the Internet in the ‘Movement for Alternative Globalization’: The Case of the Paris 2003 European Social Forum.” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 2(1): 72-95.
- Langman, L. 2005. “From Virtual Public Spheres to Global Justice: A Critical Theory of Internetnetworked Social Movements.” *Sociological Theory* 3(1): 42-74.
- Smith, J. and D. Wiest. 2012. *Social Movements in the World System: The Politics of Crisis and Transformation*. Russell Sage Foundation. New York, New York.
- Smith, J., Byrd, S., Reese, E., and E. Smythe (eds). 2012. *Handbook on World Social Forum Activism*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishing.
- Van Aelst, P. and S. Walgrave. 2002. “New Media, New Movements? The Role of the Internet in Shaping the ‘Anti-Globalization’ Movement.” *Information, Communication, and Society* Vol. 5(4): 465-493.
- Van Laer, J. 2010. “Activists online and offline: The Internet as an Information Channel for Protest Demonstrations.” *Mobilization* 15(3): 347-366.
- Van Laer, J. and P. Van Aelst. 2010. “Internet and Social Movement Repertoires: Opportunities and Limitations.” *Information, Communication, and Society* 1-26.
- Walgrave, S., Bennett, W. L., Van Laer, J., & Breunig, C. 2011. Multiple engagements and network bridging in contentious politics: digital media use of protest participants. *Mobilization*, 16(3), 325-349.