9   CYBERSOLIDARITY: Internet-Based Campaigning and Trade Union Internationalism

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Abstract *E-mail campaigns are one form of cybersolidarity— action at a distance mediated by use of the Internet in support of trade unions or groups of workers. This paper, taking the example of a campaign in support of imprisoned Eritrean trade unionists, examines the social organization and information flows underlying such campaigns. These are discussed in the light of the effectiveness of such actions, their capacity to overcome the global digital divide, current debates on the role of the Internet in the remaking of trade unionism, and labor's capacity to remake the spatial relations of capitalism.*

1   PROLOGUE: CYBERSOLIDARITY IN ACTION

Three Eritrean trade union leaders were arrested and illegally held on March 30 and April 9, 2005. News of this emerged 6 weeks later via the international trade union federations with which their unions were affiliated. The Geneva-based International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) made a call to protest to the Eritrean government.

The campaign was picked up by the trade union news service Labour Start from the Web site of the IUF and a link provided among the day's news stories. Another link urged visitors to "Act Now," leading to the text of a letter to the Eritrean government calling for their release that could be dispatched with the addition of some minimal personal information. These letters were forwarded to Eritrean embassies round the world. At the same time, details of the campaign were sent to the 31,000 subscribers to Labour Start's e-list with a link to the "Act Now!" page.

The campaign was taken up by other organizations and over 5,000 e-mails were sent within a week (1,500 in the first 14 hours) through Labour Start and other Web sites

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taking a news feed from it. The U.S. Campaign for Labor Rights and the Stop Killer Coke campaign sent it off to their e-lists—one of those arrested worked at Coca Cola. The UK campaign "No Sweat" picketed the embassy in London. UK Coca Cola workers and their union, the GMB, gave support. The umbrella international union federation, the ICFTU, has now taken up the case with the International Labour Organisation. While it has not led to the freeing of the trade unionists, it has certainly been noticed by Eritrean embassies, one of which phoned to request that no further messages were sent to its fax machine!

While other campaigns may have been more successful in reaching their aims or attracted more participants, the Eritrean campaign throws a spotlight on a number of issues of interest from the viewpoint of both IS researchers and labor activists.

2   INTRODUCTION

This e-mail campaign is one example of what we shall call *cybersolidarity*: Internet-mediated action in support of trade unions or groups of workers involved in disputes with employers or the state. An e-mail campaign is only one form of cyber-solidarity. Others include "info war" or "hacktivism" where the information assets of a target are attacked over the net (Walker 2002), boycott campaigns, and the collection of funds.

This paper will consider the organization and working of e-mail cybersolidarity campaigns and use this analysis to assess their effectiveness and value in trade union action. For reasons outlined below, the analysis will focus on the relationships between, and roles of, participants in the action and the information flows between them. This informational analysis indicates a possible area for IS researchers to contribute to the understanding of and development of social movements.

The material used is largely drawn from documentation publicly available on the World Wide Web or received by the author as a participant in labor-oriented e-lists and e-mail actions since the 1990s. Some of this material is ephemeral in that it is removed from public access as one campaign follows another.[1] Of particular value have been the regular reflections by Eric Lee of Labour Start on the effectiveness of various activities undertaken through that Web site. He has also kindly responded to my questions.

My own participation has enabled me to follow Kendall's (1999) recommendation for Internet researchers to be involved in the online forums they are researching as a means of better understanding the processes at work in the interactions they are describing. This participation reflects a commitment both to the goal of using the Internet to support trade unions as a means of emancipatory action and, at the same time, to reflecting on the nature and effectiveness of these actions as a critical researcher.

This paper examines the operation and effectiveness of campaigns such as the Eritrean and puts them in the context of the broader issues concerning implications of

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[1]Material relating to the Eritrean campaign can be found at http://www.labourstart.org/ cgi-bin/dbman/db.cgi?db=2005&uid=default&view_records=1&sb=4&so=descend&labstart_ jump=1&keyword=eritrea.

globalization, the Internet, and networked activism for labor. A brief history will first indicate the development of union use of the Internet. E-mail campaigns will then be contextualized in terms of a number of issues raised in the academic literature before more detailed analysis in terms of the social organization and information flows that make them possible.

3   THE PRE-HISTORY OF CYBERSOLIDARITY

The drive toward using the Internet as a vehicle for international trade union solidarity has not, on the whole, come from within the formal structures of trade unions themselves. Rather it has depended on a process of convincing both unions and their members and supporters of its value. Although this continues, the decisive period—in developed countries, at least—can be seen as the mid to late 1990s. Alongside the pressure toward international action from globalization, two factors were particularly important.

The first was advocacy and support from a number of people with a political commitment to the trade union movement who were also enthusiasts for the use of ICTs for these goals. They proselytized for the use of the Internet and began to create institutions ranging from Web sites to training centers that would support this activity. The Labour Telematics Centre in Manchester, U.S. Labornet, which produced a number of internationally affiliated imitators, Labor Tech conferences on use of the new media and ICTs, Eric Lee's book on trade unions and the Internet (1996) (which preceded his own Labour Start site), and the Cyber Picket Line directory all began to encourage and develop trade union interest in the Internet in this period.

Alongside advocacy of technology use, there were a number of high profile industrial disputes which demonstrated the immediate practical value of computer-mediated communications, particularly for winning support across national boundaries. The 1996-1998 Liverpool Dockers' Dispute showed the value of CMC in setting up acts of solidarity across international boundaries, which enabled them to evade the local constraints of strict anti-union laws and organize face-to-face meetings across the world. It also provided the spur to the setting up of UK Labournet (Bailey 1997; Renton 2004). The ICEM's international campaign against the Bridgestone tire company showed how it was possible to mobilize individuals internationally in cyberspace and to use the technology (in this case, the company's Web site) to wage "information warfare" in pursuit of a trade union dispute (Herod 1998a; Walker 2002). The South Korean general strike of 1996-1997 used the Internet to build support around the world.

Activities in this period laid the basis for the growth of "net-internationalism." Cybersolidarity has developed under the enabling power of widened access to the technology and the driving force of globalization and the resistance to it. Some of the pioneers have remained active and continue to play an important role in the creation and maintenance of the infrastructure and information flows required to support cybersolidarity.

4   THEORIZING CYBERSOLIDARITY: FOUR RESEARCH AREAS

Cybersolidarity is a multifaceted phenomenon: a form of action involving trade unions; a form of cyberactivism and social movement; action across space, potentially on a global scale; and a complex structure of human activity mediated by information flows. This paper, therefore, draws on a number of related and converging areas, each of which throws up questions of relevance to an understanding of cybersolidarity.

4.1 Trade Unions and the Internet

The implications of Internet use can vary widely according to the differing organizational contexts within which it occurs (Bennett, 2003). Thus while pro-labor activism shares many features with broader cyberactivism—most generally, the development of activist networks and the use of ICTs in support of a social movement—it has a number of specific features that are important (Bailey 1999). Trade unions existed long before the Internet and their structures and ideology affect how their members take up new forms of communication (Lucio Martinez and Walker, 2005). Particular "e-forms" (Greene et al. 2003) of established activities result.

The spread of the Internet encountered a trade union movement faced with a crisis. Globalization and the shift in industrial production to countries of the South corresponds to the development of labor movements in those countries, while facing those in the North with decline (Monck 2002). A remaking of trade unionism with an international dimension is consequently widely recognized to be necessary.

The role of the Internet in this is now generally recognized but its precise contribution and potentialities are still the subject of debate. Hodkinson (2001) asks "Will the new union internationalism be a 'net-internationalism'?" His negative response focuses both on political and social obstacles to internationalism per se and on what he sees as the limitations of the Internet, particularly the global digital divide. In contrast, Castells (2000) simply dismisses the potential of labor internationalism because he believes labor is exhausted as an emancipatory force as a result of its "desocialization" and "individuation" (pp. 505-506; see also Waterman 1998). Waterman (2001) and Monck (2002), accept much of Castells' analysis of the network society but dispute his conclusion, arguing that unions themselves should take on the network form typical of Internet activism. Still others believe that ICTs can at best be a useful supplement to more traditional forms of international union solidarity (e.g., Renton 2004).

How much, then, are cybersolidarity actions part of an effective remaking of trade union action in the face of globalization? How do they support trade union internationalism?

4.2 Trade Union Action and the Global Digital Divide

The impact of the Internet on trade unions is not uniform but reflects broader inequalities. Can these be overcome? The Eritrean campaign spanned the global digital

divide. Eritrea comes 149th in the world for Internet users, according to UNCTAD, and was the last country in Africa to be connected to the Internet. While one trade union federation in Eritrea has an e-mail address (one of the 9,500 Internet users in 2003), African unions generally face major problems in exploiting ICTs, mostly endemic to their societies as with the absence of infrastructure and cost; others are more specific to unions such as resources and priorities (Bélanger n.d.). Yet, despite this technological gap, the Eritrean campaign was taken up by individuals and organizations across the globe. How far, then, can activist networks provide a way around the absence of direct access to technology?

4.3 Labor and the Remaking of Spatial Relations

A major theme in critical approaches in geography is the notion that spatial relations are remade through social practices and their relationships to physical and social structures. "Space [is] not merely an inert stage on which social life simply plays itself out, but rather a social product" (Herod 2003, p. 507). Thus space is counterposed to place, in the sense of a physical location. One aspect of this debate concerns the different spatial scales—local, national, regional, and global—at which action should be taken if it is to be successful as a response to globalization.

The notions of space and the making of geographical scale are linked directly to the remaking of trade union internationalism (Waterman and Wills 2001). Two issues arise: first, the relation between the local and the global and whether trade union actions and structures necessarily have to be global to be effective against multinationals; second, whether and how labor can play an active role in the remodeling of spatial relations implied by globalization or whether it merely responds to the remaking of those relations by capital. Can trade unions and their supporters take action to remake the spatial structure in which they operate to their advantage? Herod (2001) has argued that the remaking of space by labor has tended to be downplayed in favor of its dominance by a globalizing capital. He has given a number of examples of this including the use of computer-mediated communication to redefine the spatial scope of action (Herod 1998a, 2001).

Labor solidarity is part of this remaking of spatial relations. For Herod, "the practice of labor solidarity is an inherently geographical one…a process of opening up the landscape and making the connections between workers in different parts of the globe visible" (2003, p. 509). It involves "the manipulation of space by workers and unions [which] is a potent form of social power [which] flows through spatial structures just as it flows through social structures" (Herod 1998b, p. 5). How far then does cybersolidarity actively shift the scale of trade union action? What are its spatial implications?

4.4 Cybersolidarity as Internet Activism

Despite the peculiarities of trade union use of the Internet, cybersolidarity remains a form of cyberactivism (McCaughey and Ayers 2003), dependent on the commitment and participation of individuals who identify with its goals in activist networks.

In summing up the motivations of "Internet-worked social movements" inspired by the consequences of globalization, Langman (2005, p. 52) notes four "mediations between injustice and adversity, which are often far removed from personal experience, and actual participation in a social movement." They are: "(1) information and the way it is framed; (2) a personal identity that is receptive to this information; (3) a structural location that is conducive to activism; (4) linkages or ties with networks of social actors with similar concerns."

The rooting of cybersolidarity in a preexisting trade union movement points to an identity and location that can underpin specific campaigns. However, it is clear that it is the relations between groups of actors as mediated by information that are crucial in forming effective and active networks. Our analysis of e-mail campaigns, therefore, takes the form of identifying the actors involved in different aspects of the action and the information flows between them. The latter link and coordinate the actors in pursuit of an overall goal. Thus the underlying social organization and information flows play important roles in defining the effectiveness and transformational power of campaigns. By examining this structure and its implications we can begin to answer some of the broader issues raised above. Our focus is on Labour Start as the most wide ranging and technologically innovative site.

5   THE SOCIAL AND INFORMATIONAL STRUCTURE OF CYBERSOLIDARITY

There are three major groups of actors necessarily involved in a cybersolidarity action: the protagonists in the labor dispute; the intermediaries concerned with supplying the information about it and setting up and monitoring the action; and the respondents who take part in the action. Each acts in a distinct way in response to an initial triggering event and, although their actions are coordinated to serve a single goal, the differences between them and how these are overcome are central to defining the implications of this form of action.

5.1 The Protagonists

An act of solidarity starts naturally with a triggering event such as the imprisonment of trade unionists in Eritrea. The instigators may be the state, the employer, a union organization, or a group of workers. The triggering event is place-based, although it may occur across a number of physical locations. From the viewpoint of the cybersolidarity action, two groups provide the overall framework through their position in the dispute.

- ***The subjects***: Those in whose support the action is taken. They may be those directly calling for the action or the call may come from an organization that represents them (in our case, the IUF). It is worth noting that the subjects of the call may have no direct involvement in it and only become aware that the action has been taken after the fact.

- ***The target*:** Those the action seeks to influence, in our case the Eritrean government. This may be more than one organization across a wide range: a company, state organization or government, employers' organizations, even sometimes trade unionists themselves.[2] They are not necessarily those most immediately involved in the dispute. It may, for example, be more effective to urge a multinational to intervene with a subcontractor to resolve a dispute than to seek to influence the subcontractor directly. The target will typically be unaware of the action until they begin to receive e-mails or faxes.

The protagonists typically enter the cybersolidarity action at its start and its end. The action is initiated by or on behalf of the subjects through a call for support; the target receives the flow of information generated by the action and the action ends when it is felt that it will no longer bring about useful pressure on the target.

5.2 The Intermediaries

The subsequent course of a cybersolidarity action depends crucially on a range of intermediaries who structure and initiate the information flows that underlie the action and who define and present the action to those who take part in it.

These intermediaries have several functions which are conceptually separable. In practice, they may be carried out by the same people.

- ***Information source:*** The first is acting as an information source that provides the link between the triggering action and the organizer of the online action. This need not be done by those directly involved, which suggests the digital divide need not be an obstacle here. It can be an organization to which they belong or which supports them; in the case of Eritrea, it was the international union federation to which their unions belong.

  Other sources include media reports and other activists and some Web sites enlist volunteers to help. For example, China Labor Report, based in New York, has sources providing information inside China, which has enabled them to run very precisely targeted e-mail campaigns. Labour Start has a network of correspondents, who have volunteered to provide Labour Start with current news stories from different countries or sectors. Labour Start also provides a means for any user of the Web site to submit stories or information not found elsewhere on the site.

- ***Information gatherer:*** This role consists of bringing together information and making it available for presentation on the Net. This may be an automated process, as when Web sites are scanned for items that may relate to trade union issues. Alternatively, individuals may have responsibility for covering particular countries or industries in order to ensure thorough coverage, as with Labour Start correspondents.

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[2]Often messages of support are sent to workers in dispute to encourage them in their action rather than to influence an employer or government.

At this stage, the basic information is available but the call has yet to be presented in a form to which anyone can respond electronically.

- *Networkers:* The next category of intermediaries are those that run the Web sites, e-lists, or other online mechanisms for campaigning. They form the key link between those who request a campaign and those that respond to it. The term networkers, which we borrow from Waterman (see Herod 1998a), does not do justice to the range of functions they undertake, which include

  — Maintaining the infrastructure that enables the dissemination of the information and the campaigning (e.g., Web sites, e-lists).
  — Collating, editing and making the information available in an easily accessible form.
  — Initiating, monitoring, and backing up the campaigns.
  — Building and maintaining a constituency of potential participants in campaigns.

These functions may be distributed among a team with varying emphasis put on each of them by different Web masters. Typically with trade union related sites, the networkers are technically qualified people who have a commitment to the labor movement.

The overall control of cybersolidarity actions is in their hands in that they decide what information to make available through their Net resources and which calls to take up as appeals for action. A number of concerns is involved in these decisions. One is the origin of the call for support and its relationship to the subjects of the action. Labour Start has the position that a call should come from an official trade union organization.[3] Eric Lee goes further: "The best campaigns are the ones run with the full support both of the local union… sister unions in the same sector in different countries, as well as the global union federation" (Lee 2004a). In contrast, Labour Net UK places emphasis on "contributions and reports from rank and file trade unionists, although we also welcome contributions from trade union organizations,"[4] recognizing that workers in dispute may also be in conflict with union structures (as was the case with the Liverpool dockers). This difference is also reflected in the user identity to which they appeal.

Labour Start also tends to select campaigns around issues of workers' rights, rather than privatization or wages, believing that they have a broader appeal (Lee 2004a).

Other considerations emerge from the need to build a constituency that uses a site regularly and is prepared to take part in actions. Alongside concerns about information quality and timeliness are others, including avoiding bombarding readers with appeals they are less likely to read and act upon.

At this stage, the information is presented in a form that both gives the background to the dispute and the *pro forma* letter that, on Labour Start at least, can be edited before being sent.

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[3]Personal communication with Eric Lee, 2003.
[4]"What is LabourNet" (http://www.labournet.net/whatis.html).

5.3 Respondents

Up to now, our analysis has been concerned with the flows of information and forms of action that enable a cybersolidarity action to take place. We now move to those directly involved in taking the suggested action. Here questions of a personal identity that is receptive to the information and a structural location that is conducive to activism become important in forming the basis for joining a network and responding to calls to take action.

In the case of trade unions, there is a preexisting ethos of solidarity and inter-nationalism and organizational identities as trade unionists to which an appeal can be made. These ideas do not lose their importance as a means of collective identity because of the individualistic nature of Internet use. Rather, users bring their social identities, including such norms, into the virtual collective (Brunsting and Postmes 2002; Kendall 1999).

It is possible for networkers to orient their Web sites to appeal to such preexisting identities and exploit them as an aid to mobilization (Robinson 2003). Labour Start promotes itself as the place where "trade unionists start their day on the Net." The site contains little that seeks to convince people to join a union but rather sees its role as servicing existing trade unionists in terms of information, campaigns, and technology. The identity is not one that emphasizes the differences between general secretaries and rank and file members as with Labour Net UK.

With a couple of mouse clicks, it is possible to find the information and send the letter to a prescribed recipient. Yet, however well a Web site appeals to a collective identity and however easy it is, involvement in online campaigns is ultimately an individual decision. The extent of responses to particular campaigns may vary con-siderably, not always in proportion to the inherent importance of the issue (Lee 2004b).

Greene et al. (2002) see peaks and troughs as characteristic of participation in trade unionism in general. However, some characteristics of cybersolidarity emphasize this. Participants do not necessarily have any incentive to move from one campaign to the next. Rather the very ease of participating means that the campaigning requires less consistent or deep commitment than a more long-term campaign. The incorporation of the individual into the network remains limited and, in deciding whether to participate in a given campaign, he or she may be swayed by other considerations such as time, "compassion fatigue," or the geographical closeness and familiarity of the dispute (Lee 2004b).

5.4 Assessing Campaigns

It is only when respondents act that the flow of information is transformed into a means of pressure on a target and re-enters the arena of the real world dispute that triggered the action. The subsequent impact of cybersolidarity action on the outcome of an industrial dispute is very difficult to assess. There are two measures of success (Lee 2005). The first depends on the impact of the whole action on the dispute. Here some indication of success is dependent on feedback from the direct participants,

whether the subjects of the action or the targets. This might not give a true picture of the real impact of the action and it is difficult otherwise to ascribe a precise assessment of its role in the global outcome of a dispute (e.g., winning a strike).

The second measure is a measure of how far the action has served to mobilize respondents to take part in it. This is a quantitative measure in terms of the number of e-mails sent in response to a call. The wide range of responses to different campaigns points to each respondent deciding on every campaign separately and as an individual.

There is no necessary correlation between the two measures of success, a consequence of the structure of cybersolidarity action as outlined. Lee contrasts the Eritrean campaign (high mobilization but so far no result) with a low mobilization, highly focused, but successful campaign for the reinstatement of workers at a hotel in the Bahamas (Lee 2005)—one of several successes at hotels. It is possible that certain types of target (e.g., those concerned with brand reputation or potential consumer reaction) are more susceptible to e-mail campaigns than repressive governments.

6   IMPLICATIONS

The forms of social organization and the mediating information flows implied by the nature of cybersolidarity have implications that enable us to address questions of the digital divide, the remaking of spatial relations, and the possibilities and limitations of Internet-mediated international trade union action.

Such action is in some sense a proxy action. For the respondents who act in it, it is mediated by the form in which the information is presented to them by the Web site or other means of transmission. The subjects of the action are not directly present at this stage and may not, or only minimally, be present in the whole process. This has some advantages: it means that the absence of direct access to the Internet or possession of the technology need not be an obstacle to obtaining support through the Net. To this extent, cybersolidarity can overcome the digital divide. It is also a necessity when, as in our example, the subjects of the action sit in jail or are otherwise unable to act freely.

Nevertheless, there are obvious disadvantages to this. Control of the action is in the hands of the networkers rather than those directly affected by the outcome of the action. Mostly this does not lead to problems as the networkers take steps to keep contact where possible and to ensure that the action corresponds to their wishes, even if expressed indirectly. There is, however, the potential danger of conflicts of interest here. The ability of networkers to choose news and select which campaigns are taken up as actions also lays them open to accusations of favoritism or censorship (as in a claim that Labour Start was insufficiently reporting Palestinian news).

The remoteness of respondents and subjects in the action need not be an obstacle to subsequent face-to-face interaction, as when "No Sweat" organized a trade union delegation to Mexico following a cybersolidarity action undertaken in support of workers on strike at a subcontractor for Puma in 2002. Davies (n.d., p. 4) notes that it is "extremely rare for online campaigning and 'virtual' associations to be entirely divorced from traditional, offline, place-based and face-to-face campaigns."

A cybersolidarity action clearly enables action across spatial scales that were not previously easily accessible to the actors, "opening up the landscape and making the

connections between workers in different parts of the globe visible" (Herod 2003, p. 509). This has been the result of the active creation and maintenance of a new form of action.

However there is little evidence that this has resulted in a "spatial fix" (Harvey 1996), a redefinition of the spatial parameters in the relations between capital and labor, such that it has become something generally taken into account in decisions by employers, at least outside certain highly consumer-sensitive industries such as clothing. The place-based legal and social conditions still play a dominant role in industrial disputes, although creative use of the Internet may enable trade unionists to evade local restrictions (see Grieco and Bhopal 2005).

Unless it results—accidentally or deliberately—in damage to the target's information resources or infrastructure, a cybersolidarity action does not have the direct effect on the target that place-based solidarity actions such as a sympathy strike, a human picket line, or a refusal to handle an organization's goods can have. The individual nature of the response means that it does not have the collective cohesion and power of place-based actions. A virtual presence is not a substitute. This is recognized by those who organize Internet actions. Lee (2004a) notes that, "The most successful online campaigns feature strong offline elements as well, including picket lines and other protests. They are not exclusively online." But action in cyberspace can also serve to provide the spark that leads to place-based action too (as with the pickets over Eritrea). The two supplement each other. Cybersolidarity also acts as an indication to the target that there exists a spreading awareness of a dispute and a willingness to exert pressure. This can be important in winning a dispute.

7   CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined one form of labor-oriented cyberactivism, looking at its impact on the practice of international trade union solidarity through the lens of the social relations and information flows associated with it. This points to both the strengths and weaknesses of e-mail solidarity actions, both as an aid to effective trade union struggles, a response to the global nature of capital, and a means for overcoming the global digital divide.

While Internet-enabled communications have made possible a new range of possibilities for trade union action, perhaps unsurprisingly, e-mail actions do not replace place-based forms of solidarity, although they can remain valuable as a means of support and, in the case of workers facing repression, may be one of the only forms of protest open. They may tip the balance of disputes in certain circumstances and serve to awaken and nurture a feeling of solidarity among those who respond. "Net internationalism" does not replace more traditional forms but becomes a weapon alongside them, through which they can become more effective.

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