Digital Civic Engagement Among Anarchist Activists in Poland

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Background

According to many anarchists interviewed throughout this study, conventional media is construed as tremendously skewed in the interest of economic elites that own and disseminate biased information to distract the public. They are not alone in their assessment. Research has shown that very little content is devoted to critical analyses of business or government, and nearly no space or time is devoted to social problems that economic arrangements create or the social movements that seek to reverse these trends (Dahlgren, 2005). Conventional media coverage has, as demonstrated in longitudinal analyses, actually decreased reporting on socially-relevant issues over time.

> [The trend in] levels of environmental reporting are lower [representing merely] two percent of key evening news coverage. Furthermore, in a tightly reasoned study [researchers] have demonstrated that existing media coverage generally reflects the dominant ideological and economic power-structures operating in a particular market. [T]he tendency of the media [is] to rely upon industrial sources of information more then the public relations of [advocacy] groups. In an effort to be sensational, timely, and simple, media formats underemphasize risks and over-dramatize the spin on…disputes. Thus the general public is left with a body of hardly controversial information and very little direction in terms of what one should do with such input.[1]

Given the innocuous orientation of conventional media, ICT has provided a powerful and stable platform for the conceptualization, dissemination, and evolution of independent, unbiased, and uncommodified sources of alternative information benefiting individuals concerned with sense-making in an otherwise complex world (Earl, 2006; Bansler and Havn, 2006; Robertson, 2002). Prior research has shown that the key elements in the platform's rapid popularity among communities of activists are primarily user and environmental awareness (Sanchez-Franco and Roldan, 2005) as well as potential opportunities for interaction, (LaRose, Mastro, and Eastin; 2001). ICT provides refreshing opportunities to expand awareness of the existence of like-minded others (Leinonen, Jarvela, and Kakkinen, 2005) and for direct interactive involvement among highly motivated users (Stivers, 2004). These are just a few of the many extrinsic and intrinsic rewards offered by ICT that are left completely unsatisfied by conventional content historically made available through passive unidirectional communications offered through television and print media.

How does ICT provide motivated users with the potential for environmental and interaction awareness ? Opportunities are fostered through technical filtering known also as *path and pattern recognition systems*. Through technical path and pattern recognition systems of filtration, ICT is now capable of bringing users the information they demand based on immediate analysis of similar user needs. This technological breakthrough has brought users relevant online information with unprecedented precision regardless of subject content. In this way, fragmented communities of any type living in geographically distinct regions may gain rapid access to content deemed popular with users.

> Also known as recommender systems, collaborative filtering forms an important approach to the sharing and awareness of information amongst a group of people. In loose terms, collaborative filtering [elicits website activity patterns and] recommends new objects that similar people liked. Patterns to some extent involve awareness of a trusted author, while paths involve awareness of colleagues to draw on. In making such comparisons…we wish to show…how artifacts, human activity involving them, and particular people are represented using the formal vocabularies of computers. This in turn determines what aspects of awareness and interpretation the computer supports, and what is left to human interpretation and language.[2]

Though the role of computers in unifying fragmented communities is a relatively new area for scholarly inquiry, these recommender systems and the egalitarian platforms they provide are becoming the key element in the unification of diverse disenfranchised publics. Technological advances in these recognition systems have leveled the playing field and enabled sabotaging resistance efforts to be integrated just as rapidly and precisely as the strategic circulation of unregulated neoliberal capital around the world. These recognition systems furthermore enable important information to be exchanged among relevant audiences, and in the process enhance awareness of like-minded users, as well as the conditions of deprivation and other environmental factors they operate within. According to Ben-Rafael and Sternberg, "Transnational diasporas crystallize lines of social solidarity that cross-cut nations and continents and become a driving power for both the multiculturalism of societies, and for globalization."[3] For our analytic purposes, user and environmental awareness of *diasporic deprivation* will be shown to be the primary unifying concept enabling philosophically diverse, geographically-distinct *alterglobalizers* to access the online content they require to advance, legitimate, and occasionally unify (through articulation of public dissent) their geographically fragmented but periodically coalesced oppositional consensus movement with defiant community construction capabilities among world system saboteurs around the globe.

The interconnectivity facilitated by ICT and the precision of its filtering recognition systems brings integrative content as well as non integrative content associated with globalization. While there may be many geographic, ideological, dogmatic, educational, and philosophic distinctions among its members, the online alterglobalizing platform has provided a discursive space to explore the interconnectedness of contemporary social problems, which in turn leads to discourses on the interconnectedness of solutions, which in turn leads to interconnectedness of a mass societal world-wide resistance endeavor to publicly implement these devolutionary tactics.

> Increasingly, social problems are expanding beyond national borders. A shift in one country's economy can have profound effects on the international market and economic health of other nations. As problems are becoming more transnational, so too are movements for social change. Activists are stretching beyond state boundaries to work in solidarity with those with whom they identify in distant countries.[4]

Perpetually under threat from state violence, these alienating conditions of double-edged modernity coupled with hegemonic capitalism have caused such profound disenfranchisement among Polish youth, that digitized anarchist activist platforms have become extremely popular by providing on and offline forums for a return to authentic living that encourage critical thinking and provide opportunities for lived political action that satisfies nonmaterial esoteric intrinsic needs driving alternative social constructions of society. The orientation toward achievement, left persistently unsatisfied by disingenuous fragmented conventional communities, increasingly unregulated markets, coercive states, and welfare systems incapable of any redistributive justice; are conditions that together encourage reflexive thought and motivate new forms of social bonds and lived activism on and off line.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was then used to capture the efficacy of community building and information dissemination under observation. Because the current analysis seeks to demystify knowledge-generating and other resistance activities of body modified, politically active, anarchist youth on and offline; the website's internal network content was a primary concern and was approached within a social constructivist perspective, where member beliefs and sentiments are perceived to construct their social realities and hence operational activities in regional centers. This approach led to the conceptualization of 4 categorical independent variables that are believed to influence the kind of operations occurring at regional centers. These independent variables capture dimension of 1.) network connectivity, 2.) ideological orientation, 3.) transaction exchange types, and 4.) motivating rewards. Thus

the distinct operational activities occurring in each regional headquarters are hypothesized to be dependent on member capabilities of embedding the center within the larger network, on articulating relevant ideology, on the method of resource exchanges, and on the distribution of relevant rewards. To that end, high or low network connectivity was examined based on number of links. The final dependent variable involved opportunities for rewards to motivate achievement among users so that high levels of satisfaction are capable of being experienced by participants within the online anarchist-activist framework. These were hypothesized to manifest either as opportunities for tangible material needs, no rewards, or expected to be likely found in intangible esoteric intrinsic nonmaterial rewards. Anarchist operations occurring at regional headquarters are thus deemed to be dependent upon a combination of these four variables involving connectivity, ideology, exchanges, and rewards. The current hypothesis suggests that the more embedded a regional anarchist network is, the more salient their adherence to multiple ideologies, the more cooperative their exchanges, and the more successful they are in offering opportunities for achieving intrinsic rewards; the more active and lively are the resistance activities that they offered. Since prior research suggests that the more institutionalized activities and organization engages in, the more formal and stable its' operations (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; Dobbin, 1994); the current treatment theorizes that activities occurring at each of these nine regional centers [residential squats, culture centers, pubs, meetings spaces] are a reflection of the community sentiments of the digitized and non-digitized local operational network, the adherence of members to anarchist ideologies, the flow of resource exchanged among the network, and orientation of members toward intrinsic rewards through lively action. The salience of anarchist operations on and offline by region are therefore believed to provide some representative levels of the genuine scale of socioeconomic and political resistance that has been steadily perpetuated among activist youth in Poland since the fall of communism. The analysis demonstrates that the extent to which participants are able to access existing networks, ideological information, resources exchanges, and satisfactory rewards; together determine the diversity and stability of authentic local anarchist resistance activities reflected on and offline. This approach will demonstrate that these websites and the online collectivities that they represent not only offer users knowledge surrounding globalization and unique alternate philosophical anarchist strategies to combat contemporary deleterious conditions it imposes, but does so through a variety of motivational rewards delivered through complex transactional mechanisms that authentically capture the alienating sentiments, adversarial institutional relations, and other minutiae needed to clarify the complex contemporary struggles of our times. The research argues that network activity, ideological orientation, transactions involving political, aesthetic, and socioeconomic exchanges of human capital, and access to alternate sources of

achievement greatly influence the activities offered by saboteurs concentrated around these unique regional centers of resistance. In the process, the Polish anarchist activist community has exhibited highly efficient, technology-driven, defiant community construction capabilities; and carved an admirable digitized space indicative of innovative use, providing users unlimited potential for integrative, interactive, interfacing among embodied and disembodied system saboteurs around the country and around the world.

Notes

1. Cantrill, p. 80
2. Chalmers, pp. 395, 399.
3. Ben-Rafael and Sternberg, p. 16.
4. Nepstad, p. 133.

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