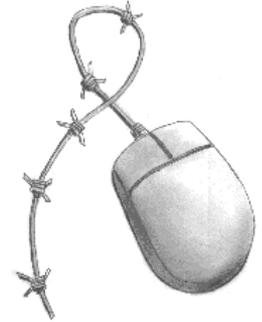


GreenNet CSIR Toolkit Briefing no. 6

Campaigning Online

Using the Internet to get your point across

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<http://www.internetrights.org.uk/>



The Internet - *the new village green?*

Environmental and social campaigners were amongst the first to take to using the Internet. The reason for this is simple - it is a low cost and highly effective communications medium.

Since the Internet was first used for protest, however, few campaigners, at local or national level, have been quick to realise its potential. This is mainly because:

- Early web-based campaigning tended to reproduce "real world" tactics, in an electronic environment.
- The skill base was initially (i.e. in the late 1980s) lacking to enable more innovative use to be made of the Internet.

Today, of course, there is a whole new generation of thoroughly computer literate campaigners taking to the Internet. There are also many more knowledgeable *geeks* around to help campaign groups, too.

In recent years the use of the Internet for campaigning, from global anti-capitalist protests to fuel price protests in Europe, has become very newsworthy. Along with the hype that often accompanies press reports of computer viruses, Internet campaigns are often portrayed in the media as something peculiar, aberrant or even dangerous.

It is only since the mid-1990s that the potential of the World-Wide-Web (WWW) has been fully realised as a global communications medium. Although developments in information technology began to transform the corporate environment in the 1980s, it was not until around 1997 that the Internet took off with the general public and online campaigning became a viable reality.

Over the next ten years, as Internet access increases, online campaigns are likely to become as significant a force as conventional ones.

The Internet enables people to interact socially without limits of geography. It can therefore give opportunities for involvement to a far greater number of people than many other sorts of campaigning. It is potentially a highly democratic medium, doing away with the barriers of distance and access that can restrict people's ability to communicate with those in power. Many more people can lobby a decision-maker online, for instance, than could usually do so in person.

Of course, barriers to access and unrestricted communication still exist on the Internet; social equality and social exclusion mean that many people do not yet have *connectivity*. The main issues here are:

- *Access* - many people's first language is not one of the major European languages which dominate business and the Internet;

- *Cost* - computers are still comparatively expensive, and beyond the reach of many people in the world (increasing Internet access via the TV may be one way around this problem, however).

Nevertheless, for many people interested in online campaigning and protest, the Internet represents a *global common*; a space that everyone should be able to access and share equally. Unfortunately, this perception is rarely shared by national governments.

The Internet is not easily mapped or controlled; it has no geography, and even three-dimensional maps make little sense of the organised chaos of its topography. This makes it problematic for those used to expanding their political and/or economic power by controlling and mapping land.

Although the Internet cannot be demarcated in the way that land and property are in the "real" world, in recent years attempts have been made to annex the 'Net on behalf of one prominent group of users - those involved with e-commerce.

Expansion of the Internet has been driven by e-commerce since around 1994. The growth of corporate interests, and the lack of any general framework of human rights in relation to use of the Internet, means that any form of online activism is often portrayed as a threat by the press. Those who buy into this view often include:

- Corporations, who feel threatened by the impact that Internet-based networking and public pressure can summon up against their excesses around world;
- Corporate Internet security analysts, who see the actions of online campaigners and activists as a threat to their computer systems; and
- Politicians and government officials, some of whom object to the alternative, uncensored medium of the Internet and its capacity for people to develop and share information that exposes the poor performance of governments and undermines their credibility.

Some people in e-commerce talk openly of a new Wild West frontier, where corporate vigilantism is the only way that e-business and global corporations can work 'safely' on the 'Net. Some even draw parallels between the perceived contemporary problem of ordinary campaigners turning to *hacktivism*¹, and that of the US railroads of the 1870s; they highlight the need for *hired guns* to make the system safe and secure².

The Internet is a great leveller. Its only real limiting factor is access, but once you have that, you can reach much the same people and numbers as the governments and corporation with whom you share the 'Net. You don't necessarily have to have a lot of money, or PR representatives, or private security guards keeping you out of buildings, to be a success on the Internet.

Because governments and corporations this equality of access threatening, in most countries rights you might take for granted elsewhere in your life (such as freedom of association and freedom of expression) do not exist on the 'Net. There have been many examples of companies who run the 'Net terminating the email and web accounts of people who are considered problematic. Many Internet service providers regard Internet access purely as a business or contractual issue, rather than in terms of social or ethical rights. Many ISPs will therefore remove a person's email access or web sites when asked to do so by the security consultants of corporations targeted by online campaigns.³

Over the next few years there is likely to be a clear and deepening divide between these two opposing

¹i.e. high-tech, Internet enabled, political activism.

²*Netspionage - The Global Threat to Information*, William Boni and Dr Gerald L. Kovacich (Butterworth-Heinemann 2000). Extracts from their writings, and similar industry commentators, are available via <http://www.shockwavewriters.com/>

³See GreenNet IR Toolkit Briefing no. 9 on *Freedom of Expression*

models of Internet usage.

Those who believe that the Internet should be a business space for corporations, free from the risks of interference by campaign groups, will continue to press for tighter controls on certain so-called undesirable activities - such as active anti-corporate protest - on the Internet.

On the other side, those who see the Internet as a medium for community-level communication will resist what they see as the gradual *corporatisation* of the Internet. They will press for real rights to be extended to the Internet, including rights of protest, in order to balance the powerful corporate interests of companies trading via the 'Net.

Developing Internet-based campaigns is an essential step in realising the role and potential of the 'Net as a *global common*, and making it a truly shared, communal space, free from the limitations of corporate control.

Campaign groups, therefore, need to understand the potential of the 'Net as an enabling medium for public pressure campaigns and lobbying.

Campaigning on Internet

Campaigning on the Internet is like campaigning through any other medium. You need:

- a target that people can identify with (preferably one that has some connection with the Internet);
- to know there is potentially a public audience out there that is motivated to join in;
- to be able to inspire people to make the campaign, and any online actions, a success; and
- an identifiable outcome.

The Internet has certain advantages over other kinds of campaign medium. It enables you to make information available to people for them to use in a number of ways; they might pass on to others online, personalise it, and then perhaps produce copies they distribute in their own area. Because of this potential for interaction and modification of information, people can participate at a variety of levels and in a range of ways with which they feel comfortable.

This kind of flexibility is rare in other kinds of campaigning, because the logistics or resources involved do not make it feasible.

Because the Internet is not limited by geographical barriers, national or regional divisions may have less significance than in other kinds of campaigning; organisations can develop greater vertical and horizontal integration within their campaigning.

Increasingly, centralised campaign groups will see their role change from *leading* campaigns to *facilitating* them; they are likely to become providers of material that enables others to work on the issue. Some people within the larger campaign groups see this as a threat to their brand in a competitive public environment. But in actuality this change throws up a challenge to them, in much the same way that the Internet challenges corporations and governments; is their role to be one of control or participation?

A good recent example of an interactive campaign, integrating various levels of expertise, participation and activity, is the anti-genetic engineering protests that across Europe. Debates on the role of genetics in agriculture have been developed and used to promote a cutting-edge campaign through the use of email and online networks. Experts and specialists work in partnership work with local activists to develop the

public understanding of the issues. This also enables other campaign work, from supermarket lobbying to direct action protests against genetic test sites.

This type of communal network of interest, where people are bound together by a common understanding of a social problem, can generate much more activity, at much lower cost, than would be possible if it were not operating through the Internet. Such campaigns can therefore be a powerful, and empowering, means of public expression.

The communications media of the Internet

The Internet began as a mechanism for sending text messages. Increasing media convergence, and the range of computer *protocols* that have been developed, means that today it is a vehicle not only for passing messages but also for broadcast TV and radio. Internet media are now powerful tools for communication; the important thing for a campaigner is to know how to use these services to best advantage.

When you are putting together an Internet campaign, you will need to work out a plan for motivating and interact with your audience (i.e. those people you hope will join in the campaign). To do this, and to decide how you are going use the Internet as a vehicle for your campaign, you need to understand something about its various elements, in order to make the most of the tools at your disposal.

Email has developed over the years to become a very complex medium. It has moved from being just a one-to-one messaging facility to a powerful means of group communication. Using *multiple email* or *email lists* you can contact ten, one hundred or one thousand people as easily as you can contact one. If you are part of a widely scattered group, email is an effective and easy means of enabling action networks to co-ordinate the activities of many people.

By using email and email lists you can unite and include all participants in a campaign, wherever they may be, in dialogues about campaign development, action or feedback. This is a significant advantage of 'Net-based campaigning. Communicating on this level is not impossible for 'real world' campaigns, but they make it very time consuming and much more expensive. With email, however, you have a powerful tool that is also very economical.

Web sites are part of most campaigns today. But little of the information that is stored on web sites is actually accessed directly. It is usually found through using *search engines* - Internet servers that keep huge classified directories of the contents of millions of web pages. It is often this seldom-accessed material that provides researchers of novel or obscure issues with the information they need to make connections and piece together the elements of their arguments.

The key to tracking down information on the Internet is therefore how well a website is indexed and linked to *search engines*.

The current top limit for campaign groups online is broadcasting. Faster connection and processing speeds will enable groups to set up their own virtual radio or TV stations without the restrictive controls imposed on the traditional broadcast media. Indeed, this is already happening; there is a whole range of small stations, including some from the UK, routed through the *Live 365* web site (<http://www.live365.com/cgi-bin/directory.cgi>). As *web casting* becomes the norm for society's broadcast media, issues over who defines and controls audio and video standards on the Internet, and hence who controls the form of society's media communications, will become more contentious.

Information-only, or "passive" campaign sites

The majority of Internet sites are 'passive'; they do not direct or invite action, they merely provide information and opinion. Passive sites can be very useful. They can provide links to other organisations working on similar issues. They can provide news and recent developments relating to an issue. And for the beginner, they can provide an outline of the issues and references or links to further learning materials.

"Passive" data on the 'Net falls into the following categories:

- Administrative documents, such as press releases, reports and commentary/op-ed. articles;
- News coverage - of which there are large quantities on the 'Net in text, audio and video;
- Personal views and musings on a wide range of subjects, ranging from deep ecologists to racist hate sites; and
- Files, of all types, sizes and descriptions, containing images, video, audio, music and computer code.

Early campaign sites contained nothing more than large amounts of text. Slow connection speeds made viewing lots of graphics tedious and difficult. Today, connection speeds have increased six to ten times what they were ten years ago.

There is nevertheless, a continuing preponderance of dense campaign material. This is not a problem where that is a core aspect of the site - for example, the storage of a large quantity of technical documents online as a resource to help community campaigners. But as a means of inspiring people to take information away and act upon it, many sites fail to provide a simple and inviting scheme of design.

Information can enable personal education, networking and action. All too many sites do not engage the user to actively participate in determining courses of action. These sites will give you a brochure, ask you to read it, and then to do as they say to take action on their behalf. Although this may activate you as a citizen, you are really just working to someone else's agenda. You may not have personal control or involvement with the issue. This sort of approach is gradually beginning to change, however. These kinds of Internet sites can be very useful, and play an important role in terms of the Internet's global 'consciousness'.

Activist campaign sites

An action-based web site will give some responsibility and autonomy in the use of information to the recipient.

Many web sites used to give out phone numbers or postal addresses of targets for people to lobby. Today that is no longer necessary, with so many corporations, government departments and regulators now online. This makes online campaigns easy to devise and operate.

Rather than simply giving information to the public, it is now possible to create channels by which people can take action themselves.

A key feature of the 'Net that makes this possible - *scripting*.

Scripting can enhance your Internet site and help your online campaign in all sorts of ways. It can be used to:

- run web events or actions;
- enable the automation of certain tasks, such as compiling petitions;

- create dynamic pages that extract information from a database.

Good use of scripting can save you and your supporters time and effort. It can be especially helpful for small groups, enabling them to produce campaigns just as effectively as larger, well-funded organisations. The *McSpotlight* site is a good example of a campaign site using scripting creatively (see next section). The 'Fax Your MP' site uses scripting to link together the web and a fax portal to allow people to find their member of Parliament and fax them a message⁴. Another good example is the *Stop Esso* web site which runs complex campaigns around the lobbying of the Esso corporation.⁵

Campaigns and "hacktivism"

"Hackers" are not nasty people who break into computer systems. That is a misnomer given by the media. A "hacker" is anyone who is very good with computer systems, especially networked computer systems like those on the Internet.

The most hi-tech form of Internet protests are usually backed up by hackers, and have been labelled as "hacktivism" ("hacker" + "activism"). Today the term *hacktivism* is usually taken to mean the use of the Internet for hi-tech campaign co-ordination.

One of the great milestones in active online campaigning, or hacktivism, was the *McSpotlight* web site⁶. This provided access to the vast amounts of material being produced about the McDonalds burger chain from the *McLibel* trial.

It also used scripting and databases to enable users to search for material, to "adopt a branch" (which then integrated them into a database for people to contact them locally) as part of global McDonalds protests, and to download material for direct use or sub-editing to enable people to set up their own local actions. The *Stop Esso* site also works in a similar way, allowing people to 'adopt' an Esso filling station.

There are currently a number of hacktivist groups that have been promoting global protests on a variety of issues. Notable examples of groups that work on social and environmental issues are:

- A group called the *Electronic Disturbance Theater*,⁷ who, on behalf of the Zapatista rebels of southern Mexico, have been waging an online lobbying campaign against human rights and economic abuses by the Mexican government.
- *Adbusters*⁸, who develop online campaigns that challenge the privatisation of public space and corporate branding.
- *the electrohippie collective*⁹, who have been developing a number of actions on environmental and globalisation themes for online and off-line use.
- *®TMark*¹⁰, which promotes online action against brand names and multinational corporations.

⁴The 'Fax You MP' site is at <http://www.faxyourmp.com/>

⁵The 'Stop Esso' web site is at <http://www.stopesso.com/>

⁶<http://www.McSpotlight.org/>

⁷Information of the *Electronic Disturbance Theater*, and their action tool *The Zapatista Tribal Port Scan* (ZTPS) system, are available from <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html>

⁸The *Adbusters* action site is at <http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/>

⁹*the electrohippie collective's* web site is at <http://www.fraw.org.uk/ehippies/>

¹⁰The *®TMark* web site can be found at <http://rtmark.com/>

There are a number of other groups who work to a more computer-centric agenda.¹¹ Some of their work does involve cracking computer systems; the "anonymous" group, for example, who protested about the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in early 2001, by breaking into the conference computer system and stealing the personal records of the conference attendees from the database.

Hactivism pushes the boundaries of online protest on the Internet, and in the process can generate new ways of carrying out online actions. *the electrohippie collective's* online protest during the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) Seattle conference in 1999 attracted around half a million participants over four days, and partially closed the WTO's web server.

Other actions focus on email or on getting the public to lobby governments on national or international issues. Hacktivists are also developing media resources via the Internet. A good example of this is the Indymedia12 group who, during protests such as those in Seattle, Prague or Genoa, set up live web casting of video and audio from the protest groups on the Internet.

Hactivism is often decried by the mainstream IT industry and by some government agencies. But hacktivists have an important role to play in developing the tools and techniques that will be required in a "wired", "globalised" world. Most importantly, hacktivists also ensure that issues of public participation and use of new communication media stay on the agenda, instead of being submerged beneath the attempts of media and communications corporations to control them.

The Internet also allows individuals to set up their own actions, and then publicise them. A good example was a student in America, Jonah H. Peretti. He noticed that the Nike web site has a system where you could design your own pair of trainers online. He requested a pair with the word 'sweatshop'. Nike declined his order. But the series of email from him to Nike, and Nike's responses, formed the basis of a popular anti-Nike web site that inspired many others to take action themselves.

Putting it together

The Internet and the convergence of communications media are gradually redefining the world and how we look at it. Being able to send a text message on your phone or seeing live news from the other side of the globe are aspects of these changes.

These developments in technology also enable globalisation; without these communications media, multinational corporations could not function. These same media are also enabling a whole new age of protest against globalisation¹³, economic exploitation and the abuse of human rights, in response to the actions of the multinationals.

If you have an idea for a campaign, and you can communicate that campaign to people with words and pictures, your campaign can be run online. The more novel, appealing and personalised you can make that campaign, the better.

There is a clear need amongst campaign groups for more people to be able to design information for the Internet, and to set up technical aspects of online campaigns such as scripting and media streaming. Groups like the Electronic Disturbance Theater are working on actions that you can develop online. Others, such as *the electrohippie collective*, are developing action tools (to be launched on their web site in 2002)

¹¹For example, a well designed digest of hacktivist issues can be found at <http://hactivism.openflows.org/>, and another at <http://www.hackershomepage.com/>

¹²They have an extensive website located at <http://www.indymedia.org/>

¹³An example is the 'Urban75' site - <http://www.urban75.com/>

that create the web pages or scripts you need to carry out actions - all you need to do is enter your own information in the appropriate locations.

With *dynamic content* such as this, (e.g. interactive, clickable maps or information databases supported by *scripting*) you can involve people in exploring an issue for themselves, in ways that appeal and apply to their own circumstances.

The future

Hactivism exploits trends towards increasing convergence within the world of communications. As communications media consolidate and converge, there will be a greater crossover between broadcast media, the Internet and conventional print journalism. This material will all be accessed in a similar way to the WWW; this means that it can be indexed, and accessed by search engines.

Increasingly, people will be able to access all these media automatically using a 'system agent'; this is a smart box that monitors broadcast channels and the Internet, and searches out particular kinds of programme content. The first such devices went on sale in 2000. Digital media, such as digital TV, carry much more than just images. They also carry information about the programme itself. In the future these smart boxes could allow people to follow particular interests and issues, such as protests and online activism, far more easily than at present.

In future, a well-designed online action could really reach a global audience, using audio and video presentations as part of its message. Protest groups could broadcast material showing environmental destruction, or human rights abuses, rather than just telling people about it.

In future, campaigns will not just be limited to text and graphics. Increasingly people will be able to stream audio and video, even live (the next generation of mobile phones theoretically has enough capacity for transmitting data to allow this).

'Net utopians have always viewed the Internet as an opportunity to develop a seamless network of human experience and expression. As society goes online, so people's means of expressing approval, dissatisfaction, and the desire for change, must go online too. This view has not been well received by those who regard use of the Internet for lobbying and campaigning against the activities of governments and corporations as "virtual terrorism". It is important that these views do not prevail.

The Internet has the potential to be a unifying force for ordinary people against the worst oppressions and excesses of humanity in general, but only if we can develop the idea of a "global common". To ensure that access and use of the 'Net remains in the hands of ordinary people, it is essential that people begin to express their desires for a better world online. To *log on, load up, and speak out*.

The GreenNet Internet Rights Project

GreenNet¹⁴ is the UK member of the Association for Progressive Communications¹⁵ (APC), and is leading the European section of the APC's Civil Society Internet Rights Project¹⁶. The primary goal of this project is to provide the resources and tools necessary to defend and expand space and opportunities for social

¹⁴GreenNet - <http://www.gn.apc.org/>

¹⁵APC - <http://www.apc.org/>

¹⁶CSIR Project - <http://rights.apc.org/>

campaigning work on the Internet against the emerging threats to civil society's use of the 'Net. This involves developing ways and means of defending threatened material and campaigning, as well as lobbying to ensure a favourable legal situation for free expression on issues of public interest.

Until recently, the social norms of Internet communities, together with a very open architecture based on supporting these norms, regulated the Internet, and was responsible for its openness. The main forces of regulation now, however, are the business sector and government legislation. Corporations and governments are pressing for fundamental changes in legislation and in the architecture of the Internet. Unless challenged, these moves could radically change the nature of the 'Net, making it a place of oppressive controls instead of freedom and openness. It is in this context that APC's Internet Rights project is being developed.

This briefing is one in a series¹⁷ that document different aspects of work and communication across the Internet. Although written from the perspective of the UK, much of its content is applicable to other parts of Europe. There is continuing work on these issues, as part of the European project. If you wish to know more about these briefings, or the European section of the APC Civil Society Internet Rights Project, you should contact GreenNet. You should also check the APC's web site to see if there is already a national APC member in your country who may be able to provide local help, or with whom you may be able to work to develop Internet rights resources for your own country.

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For more information about the Civil Society Internet Rights Project, or if you have questions about the briefings, contact ir@gn.apc.org.

¹⁷<http://www.internetrights.org.uk/>