

ARTICLE

Digital vs Material: the Everyday Construction of Mediated Political Action

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between internet technologies and political action has often been analysed with an emphasis on the empowering qualities brought about by the digital age. Frequently, this is to the detriment of further consideration of the continuing role of 'old'/traditional media, yet, campaigning organisations and political groups in Britain are still investing their few economic resources in the production of printed activist magazines, as well as developing web-based platforms. Based on ethnographic research amongst solidarity campaign organisations and the Trade Union movement in Britain, this paper will show that the relationship between internet technologies and social movements is embedded in a double tension of empowerment and anxiety. It is by considering this ambivalent tension – the paper will argue – that we can shed some light on the continuing role of printed media in the everyday mediation of political action, and we can better appreciate how new media have not replaced old media but may have powerfully transformed their meaning.

KEYWORDS

Media activism; alternative media; political action; internet technologies; ethnography

Introduction

The mediation of political action, in its multiple varieties of forms, is a practice that has defined the everyday reality of political movements throughout history. Downing (1990), for instance, traces the roots of dissident publications back to the revolutionary pamphleteers of the American War of Independence, and shows how media activism has been a central form of political action from the nineteenth-century women's press and the suffragette movement to the civil rights movements of the 1960s (p.180-191). Thus, counter-information practices and the mediation of political action have been part of the personal histories of those involved in social, cultural, and political struggles across the world, throughout history, and long before the advent of the World Wide Web.

However, comparing the production of resistant magazines or newspapers in the past with the contemporary internet-dominated reality would be extremely misleading. Today in a media-saturated world, due to the expansion of what Kellner (2003) identifies as *technocapitalism* or what other scholars understand as the rise of a global networked society (Castells, 1997) or information society (Lash, 2002), the everyday mediation of political action has come to invest a new role for people involved in social struggles. The Net has enabled new connections and coalitions, and created new media spaces where political action can be constructed. Furthermore, as Terranova (2004) suggested, the very design of the internet – the way which we understand it and imagine it as a *network of networks* – has had a massive impact on social dynamics and understandings (2004, p.41). This can be said especially with reference to people's understanding of political action. This latter point is evident in the work

of many 'new social movement' scholars who have explored the way in which the internet enabled the construction of global alliances and highly visible networks of communication and action (Melucci, 1996; Diani and Della Porta, 1999; Castells, 1997a, 1997b). Furthermore, as Couldry and Curran suggest:

Media have always been present in other types of conflict (French Revolution, Iranian Revolution etc.), but what was missing from those major conflicts was access by all sides to global means of self-representation, which could change the scale on which those conflicts were played out. (2003: p.5)

The internet has therefore become a new space, a space that granted the possibility of a global visibility to the people involved in social and political struggles, and that – as the above quote suggests – has changed the scale on which conflicts are played out. However, it is important to ask ourselves: has the internet really empowered the construction and experience of political action? How is online mediated action transforming media activism? Is the digital replacing the material in the everyday construction of mediated political struggle?

Focusing on the ethnographic context of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign - a British solidarity organisation that campaigns in defence of Cuba's right to self-determination and that has been involved since 1984 in the production of the *CubaSi* magazine - this paper aims at addressing the above questions. In order to do so, this paper will at first explore how new information and communication technologies (ICT) have empowered political action and media activism in different ways. Afterwards, it will consider the challenges, anxieties and problems that people encounter in their everyday use of the internet as a tool for social change. These internet-related anxieties, it will be shown, influence people's understanding of printed media and shed some light on the continuing role of traditional/old media forms. In this framework, therefore, it is important to appreciate the way in which the digital is not replacing the material but may be powerfully transforming its meaning.

Alternative Media and the Challenge of Interdisciplinary Research

In addressing the concept of alternative media, this paper recognises the complexities involved in its definition. Scholars in media studies, who engage with the conceptualisation and understanding of alternative media, have been challenged by the multiplicity and fluidity of their forms, organisations, ideologies or political projects. Created by professional and non-professional journalists, by political activists or individuals committed to particular world views, alternative media are broadly understood as small scale media which are linked to the realities of social movements (Downing, 2001), defined by horizontal communication, participatory practices (Atton, 2002) and content that is more or less in explicit opposition to the one of dominant media (Downmunt, 2007). Concepts such as 'alternative', 'radical', 'our media', 'citizen', 'activist', 'tactical' etc. have all been used to address the multiple variety of alternative media forms.

In the 1980s and 1990s the work of John Downing, first published in 1984, was the first comprehensive analysis of alternative media in English. By uncovering the connection of these media forms with the political realities of social movements around the world, Downing (2001) focused on the political dimension of their, and has coined the term 'radical media' in order to define them. In contrast with Downing's definition of radical media, Atton (2002)

proposed a much more impure and hybridised definition of counter-hegemonic media forms, when he coined the term ‘alternative media’.

According to Atton’s (2002) perspective, ‘alternative’ includes an extremely diverse range of media, from zine publishing and video productions to small presses, and thus it is not restricted to media which are linked to social movements. In his analysis, however, Atton (2002) does not exclude the political aspect of alternative media, but he insightfully argues that scholars cannot understand and conceptualise these media practices only by referring to their counter-hegemonic content. Indeed, as he suggests, any model must consider alternative and radical media not simply in terms of differences in content and medium/carrier, but in relation to how communication as social process is construed (2002, p.24). Therefore, Atton (2002) emphasises the transformative potential of the media as reflexive instruments of communication; his focus is on process and relation rather than on content (p.30).

Due to their proliferation, which as Meikle (2002) has shown, was largely triggered by the technological developments of the last decade, there has been a growing interest in alternative media forms (2002, pp. 59-88). Within these debates, further consideration has been given to the social and political dimension of these alternative media. Couldry and Curran (2003), for instance, have stressed the political and social goals included in these media practices, and argued that within the network society, counter-hegemonic media forms serve to empower local conflicts, and to transmit their messages, goals and ideologies on a global scale.

By bringing together the insights of both Atton and Downing, Waltz (2005) calls for a distinction to be made between alternative media and activist media, where the latter are defined by those media forms which actively engage their readers in some kind of social change (2005, p.3). According to Waltz, the distinction enables us to understand that activist media can also be ‘alternative’, but that some forms of alternative media – such as fanzines – are not necessarily involved with social and political change (2005, p.4). Waltz argues for the importance of studying these media forms as spaces for dialogue and hegemonic struggle (2005, p.19), and in doing so draws heavily upon Downey and Fenton’s (2003) understanding that the public sphere is an ever-changing entity made up of many overlapping discussions, and not a single static form. Relying on the work of the above-mentioned scholars, my research project focuses on the social and political dimension of alternative media, and understands these media forms as being connected with the realities of social and political minorities across the world.

This paper locates itself in the larger framework of my PhD research project, titled *Mediated Resistance: Alternative Media, Imagination and Political Belonging in Britain*, which is jointly supervised by the Anthropology and the Media and Communications departments at Goldsmiths College. The choice of ‘adventuring’ in an interdisciplinary research programme was motivated by two main concerns. On one hand, I was concerned by the fact that although anthropological studies on the media have, in fact, proliferated only in the last decade (Peterson, 2005, Herzfeld, 2001), in some areas of the discipline the importance of media technologies as frameworks of anthropological analysis is still widely under-estimated. By understanding media as one aspect of contemporary life, no different in essence from law, kinship, economics or religion (Askew, 2002, p.10), media anthropologists are today committed to gather new and insightful ethnographic voices in order to fill in the silence on media technologies and practices, which has for too long echoed in the discipline.

On the other hand, my research project is grounded in the belief that it is of fundamental importance to apply an anthropological and ethnographic perspective to the understanding of alternative media. In media studies, alternative media are an area of academic interest that is still relatively new. Despite being extremely insightful, most of the work produced on the topic (Downing, 1998; Atton, 2002; Curran and Couldry, 2003, Waltz, 2005; Coyer *et al*, 2007), seems to encounter what Ortner (1995) understands as the mayor problem of anthropological studies of resistance: namely the problem of ethnographic ‘thinness’. In a rich and engaging article, Ortner explores different approaches to resistance within anthropology in order to prove that the majority of studies on resistance involve a refusal of ethnographic thickness – a failure of holism or density, – which itself may take various forms (1995, p.174). The problem of ethnographic thinness, according to Ortner, leads to the sanitization of the internal politics of resistant groups, and this impulse to sanitise the internal politics of the dominated must be understood fundamentally as romanticism (1995, p.190).

In a similar way to ethnographic studies on resistance within anthropology, analysis of alternative media and their relation to the lived experience of mediated political action are marked by a certain degree of ‘thinness’: ‘They are thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of these groups, thin on the subjectivity – the intentions, desires, fears, projects – of the actors engaged in these dramas’ (Ortner, 1995, p.190). Highlighting the frustrations, desires, projects and feelings of the people who engage in the everyday mediation of political action is the main priority of my research project, which aims at providing a new ethnographic approach to the understanding of alternative media.

The data presented in this paper is the product of one year-long ‘traditional anthropological’/ ethnographic fieldwork exercise, combined with textual analysis of the alternative media that I encountered. My main field of research was the Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC), a British organisation which is networked with other single-issue campaigns, the Morning Star Daily and the Trade Union Movement in Britain. The organisation – previously known as British-Cuba Resource Centre – was born in 1978 out of a grassroots movement of individuals who were interested in Cuba’s socialist achievements. Over the years the group grew, and by binding effective political and economic networks with the major Trade Unions, it became the leading solidarity organisation in Britain with a focus on Cuba and Latin America.

Today the organisation consists of 5 full time employees, more than 20 regular volunteers, 4000 individual members, 450 Trade Union branches affiliates, 28 local groups on national territory and two sister organisations in Northern Ireland and Scotland. The organisation’s national office is based in North London; here the campaign organisers and volunteers engage in a variety of tasks, from general administration work to the organisation of different political events. Yet much of their work is dedicated to combating negative representations of Cuba, and persuading the British public that Cuba represents a viable alternative in the current neo-liberal global economy. In order to do this, the organisation focuses its political action on counter-information strategies and the production of ‘alternative news’ by relying on different offline and online spaces.

Of the many media platforms that define the production of news within the campaign, the *CubaSí* magazine is the oldest. Today, the organisation prints between 5000 and 6000 copies, which are distributed freely to members and organisers, and key figures in the Trade Union Movement or in other networked organisations (e.g. the Morning Star Daily, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, other single issue campaigns). The magazine is also sold for £2.00 to

the general public at conferences and events. Similarly to the production and management of the other online spaces, the production of the magazine lies entirely in the hands of the national office. Everyone within the office writes, edits, proofreads, translates and does media research. However, the editorial decisions are made by the director of the campaign and the organisation's communication officers. Contributors vary according to editorial necessity, and are usually local group leaders, members of the executive committee, experts on certain topics, or Trade Unionists.

In 1996/1997, the organisation launched its first website, by relying on free-service offered by Pop-Tel, which at the time was well known particularly in the third sector as a supplier of internet services. The website has today become an important online platform for the construction of political action and the production of 'alternative news'. In 2003, the *CubaUpdate* email newsletter was introduced. Today, the *CubaUpdate* is sent on a weekly basis to about 3000 members and subscribers. As well as the *CubaSí*, *CubaUpdate* and the website, there are the other main spaces for information exchange or dissemination that are emerging (such as the online platforms of Facebook and YouTube).

It can be seen that the relatively long history and media involvement of the organisation makes CSC a rich and fascinating site of research, where the impact of contemporary technological developments can be addressed, and alternative media practices can be understood under a new ethnographically thick framework. A framework that analyses alternative media in historical development and everyday transformation; a perspective that considers the imaginative ways in which people are ready to re-shape their own understanding of political participation and media activism in order to adapt to society's historical transformations brought about by the digital age.

The Internet as an empowering tool: Media Activism in a Digital Domain

As mentioned above, the relationship between internet technologies and political action has often been analysed with an emphasis on the empowering qualities brought about by the advent of the World Wide Web. A classic example of this can be found in the workings of the EZLN (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional) in Chiapas. Indeed, as some scholars have noticed (Castells, 1997, Ribeiro, 1998; Slater, 1998; Atton, 2004; Atton, 2007), the social and political movement for the liberation of Chiapas was fought largely with the use of internet technologies, in a struggle which was aimed at getting world-wide support. 'Communication' became a key word in people's experience of political struggle. As the Sub-Comandante Marcos once explained:

Communication means help to keep the image of the movement alive. If a movement is made to appear dead or moribund, irrespective of the reality on the ground, this constitutes a greater threat than superior military strength. (Slater, 1998, p.394)

The case of the EZLN movement was perhaps one of the first in which ICT played a major role in redefining the terrain for political action of local conflicts and empowering them at a global level. In the following years there are countless examples of the ways in which ICT have been adopted by subaltern groups as new platforms for political action and media activism. This is especially evident when considering Castell's (1997) discussion of anti-globalisation movements, or looking at the work of Diani and Della Porta on new social movements (2002).

The advent of the internet has had a positive and empowering impact on social and political struggles across the world for one main reason: it generated the belief that the media messages produced by political groups – or ethnic and social minorities across the world – could reach a global scale. This point is made clear in the work of Couldry and Curran (2003, p.5) mentioned above, but it is also evident in Ribero's (1998) discussion of cyberpolitics, and his argument that contemporary social struggles are fought within new information and communication technologies, because these are understood as a new weapon: a weapon that allows people to 'witness at a distance' (1998, p. 344).

When in 1996-1997 the Cuba Solidarity Campaign launched its first website, enthusiasm and expectation towards the world-wide potential of new technologies was prevalent within the organisation. In the Autumn 1996 *CubaSí* issue, 'immediacy', 'efficiency' and 'world-wide direct online action' were key words used in the articles to highlight the advantages the internet would bring to their cause. In the coming years these expectations were placed into practice within the organisation and the internet became a fundamental medium that empowered their political action. As happened in other single issue campaigning organisations across Britain (Venezuelan Information Centre, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Justice for Colombia, and many others etc.), the internet was seen as an empowering tool for a variety of different reasons.

In the first place, it emerged during my interviews, new information and communication technologies facilitated the construction and consolidation of political networks both at national and trans-national levels. Here it is important to understand that world-wide networks of communication and action defined the workings of the campaign and the other organisations long before the advent of the internet. This is especially true if we consider the fact that, like many other solidarity campaigning organisations across the world, CSC has long been involved in the construction of inter-continental networks of association and action. Yet the internet transformed these networks in a substantial way. Through email exchange and web-links, day-to-day communication with other political and media organisations became an inexpensive, immediate and regular practice within the everyday reality of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign. This has had a great impact on the way in which, nowadays, political action is imagined and organised.

Secondly, another shared understanding is represented by the fact that people believe that the internet has granted them with easier access to both institutional and non-institutional organisations. This, according to my informants, has improved their ability to pressure the government and to be politically influential. In the *CubaSí* issue of Autumn 1996 – which followed the launch of the website – the national office of the campaign expressed its enthusiasm about the fact that they finally could get their message across to the high centres of global power. Such enthusiasm faded shortly afterwards. One year later, in the winter 1997-1998 issue of the magazine, a reader – who defined himself as a 'net-enthusiast' – reports his own failed attempt to pressure governmental institutions through online action. When he wrote an email full of anger and discontent about U.S. policy on Cuba to the White House, the White House responded via snail-mail:

Thank you for your message. I've been touched by the many expressions of support and encouragement I have received from people everywhere who care deeply about my Administration and about the future of the United States and the world. I am doing

all I can to help us meet the crucial challenges that face all of us. Sincerely, Bill Clinton (*CubaSi Magazine*, Autumn 1997-1998, p.28)

The early enthusiasm for the internet as a tool which granted access to worldwide institutions was, thus, replaced by a certain degree of scepticism. Yet the belief remained strong within the campaign, and workers, members and volunteers strongly rely on new information and communication technologies in order to pressure governments, corporations, institutions etc. Insightful in this regard is this extract from a semi-structured interview with Natasha Hickman, the current communication officer of CSC:

V: Do you think the internet has transformed the way you see political action?

T: I think it makes it ten times easier to take an action, to join a group and you can build petitions on names and things. You know, you can do that really quickly and cheaply. If we had the technology, we could do like Oxfam who can jam the inbox of 30.000 people overnight.

V: And do you think that's effective?

T: Yeah... I think it is, because it's public opinion... For instance why are the supermarkets worried for their green credentials? They are not worried about the environment. They are worried about their customers. I mean on targeted campaigns I think it's really effective. People are always worried about their brands, images etc. Whether it is effective with the Government I don't know, because they know that people easily forget... But you can reach a lot of people. That's it. That's the thing. People would forward it to other people, I mean you can get the message out, to a lot more people and hopefully if you cast the net wider you might be able to get few more fish...

In the above extract, many important issues emerge. One of these is that notions of empowerment are often accompanied by notions related to the limits of the technologies available. Another issue, which is perhaps more central to the argument in this paper, is represented by the fact that, as Natasha suggests, the internet is often understood as an empowering tool because it has enhanced their chances of 'getting the message out there' and pressuring governments, corporations and institutions in more or less effective ways.

The idea of 'getting the message out there' leads to another theme which makes them see the internet as an empowering medium: namely the construction and dissemination of 'alternative news'. The use of the net has transformed the ways in which media messages within the organisation were produced and transmitted. In the last 10 years, the messages produced by the campaign have reached a level of distribution and circulation which cannot be compared to the early nineties. Today, the Cuba Solidarity Campaign produces news pieces, press releases and counter-information bulletins on an everyday basis, which are circulated via the website, the Cuba Update Newsletter, or digital mailing lists such as the Press Action Network. This is a network constructed by a group of more than 200 individuals which monitors the press and other media in order to promptly reply to misrepresentations of Cuba.

In this context, media activism – which not more than fifteen years ago was centred merely upon the production of the *CubaSi* magazine or the circulation of printed leaflets – has been transformed. The terrain of media activism has become today a digital one; one that is

primarily constructed through online networks or platforms; one that is gradually transforming the way in which political action is imagined and organised and that is empowering the people involved. Here we are to ask ourselves: but can the relation between new technologies and political action be perceived merely as a relation of empowerment? Is the digital replacing the material?

Digital Vs Material: Internet related anxieties and the continuing role of printed media

The above discussion has shown that the internet has transformed and empowered political action and alternative media production in fascinating ways. But focusing only on this facet of the relationship between political groups and new information technologies can imply that we overlook other fundamental aspects. Indeed as Atton (2004) suggests:

To consider the Internet as an unproblematic force for social change is to ignore the political and economic determinants that shape the technology; it is to pay little attention to how technological ‘advances’ may be shaped or determined by particular social and cultural elites (corporations, governments); and it is to ignore the obstacles to empowerment that legislations, inequalities of access, limits on media literacy and the real-world situations of disempowerment necessarily place on groups and individuals. (2004, p.24)

During my fieldwork with the people of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign and other interconnected organisations, it emerged that activists’ attitude to new information and communication technologies is a complex and ambivalent one, which is often embedded in a tension of empowerment and frustration. Indeed, a vast majority of my fieldwork situations or semi-structured interviews revealed that people’s relationship to internet technologies was defined by both an appreciation of the possibilities they had been granted, and at the same time feelings of frustration and anxiety. Looking at this ambivalent relationship, this paper contends, is of central importance in order to appreciate the continuing role of printed media, and to understand that new media are not replacing old media but are powerfully transforming their meaning.

Internet-related anxieties can have a variety of different connotations (at times very personal) and different scales of intensity, depending on personal and individual situations or on the history of a particular organisation. Yet during fieldwork it emerged that people from different organisations and backgrounds shared similar frustrations. The most common ones that I will be discussing here are those related to lack of control over the messages produced, to issues of information overload, and to the too-often individualist ideology promoted by the internet and thus the problem of ‘online presence’.

In the first place, people are anxious about the fact that in an internet-dominated world, there is no real control over the messages produced. Hence – since anyone can ‘Google’ the information required – it is far easier for the messages of the campaign to be appropriated for counter-progressive purposes. During the entire duration of my fieldwork, I have not witnessed any situation in which this has happened. Yet the anxiety related to lack of control over messages produced is a crucial definer of the everyday construction of mediated political action, and has had an enormous impact on the production of the magazine. Similarly to

Downing's (1998) or Atton's (2002) descriptions of radical and alternative media, the *CubaSí* magazine was, in the mid-eighties and beginning of the nineties, a 'collective space' for debate in which controversial topics that affected the politics of the island were discussed (e.g. the issue of political prisoners, gay rights, racism etc). Furthermore, at the time – as it emerged from an interview with the then editor of *CubaSí* – production values largely emphasised 'participation', 'collectivity' and 'discussion'.

In the last ten years, however, the production process of the *CubaSí* has changed dramatically, and today the magazine entirely focuses on the dissemination of 'uncritical and positive news' about Cuba. The reasons behind such a change can be very diverse and socially complex, especially when we are engaged in an ethnographic analysis. However, different elements seem to suggest that the choice of focusing 'on uncritical and positive news' was largely influenced by the internet-related anxiety of lack of control over message produced. Today, news pieces and articles are anticipated in the online newsletter, published in the magazine, and stored on the website. In this context, all media texts enter the online domain. Therefore, debate is no longer possible, because – as Natasha Hickman explained – any critical stance can be appropriated by other media organisations who would use CSC criticism for their own agendas and claim that 'even the Cuba Solidarity Campaign says that...!'

Lack of control over messages produced is not the only internet-related anxiety transforming the experience of political activism and alternative media production. Another issue to be taken into account is the stress caused by the information overload that new technologies have made possible. The director of the campaign, for instance, complained about the amount of emails he receives daily and about the fact that, with an increased workload, he is no longer able to properly follow up the news and events of other networked organisations. This everyday experience of information overload – typified by the amount of emails that pass unnoticed and/ or the number of messages that are stored into separate folders without being read – has triggered questions about the worth of their own counter-information strategies. As we have seen in the above sections, organisations such as CSC strongly rely on mailing lists, press releases and online information bulletins in order to disseminate their messages. Yet people's own experience of the information overload created by the internet makes them question the very efficiency of their own alternative media practices.

Information overload is often linked to another internet-related frustration, which is created by the too often individualistic ideology promoted by the internet. In an era where blogs, individual websites and zines have come to dominate the net, individual messages are often given the same importance as the messages that have arisen out of the tensions and negotiations of a collective of people who have joined forces to present a more or less coherent political discourse. This understanding highly affects the way in which activists perceive the internet, because they perceive it at times as a threat to their own 'collective voice'. One day, for instance, the director of CSC looked at me and asked 'what should we do when the message of a single eleven year old can achieve a greater importance than our own?'

This reflection challenges understandings that see the internet merely as a politically empowering medium. As communication tool and network-creator, the internet seems to be fundamental, but when referring to the construction and transmission of political ideologies (and especially marginal collective voices), the internet should be understood for its emphasis on individualism and individual meanings. In fact as Natasha once told me:

You know it's so difficult out there [in the online space]! You have some websites on which more money was spent that look more polished, more serious, and people might give them more credibility, and that is probably a danger, it will be a danger. You know some of them can have an amazing online presence and actually be only three people.

Lack of control over messages produced, information overload, and the individualist ideology of the internet are all challenges to people's perception of new information and communication technologies merely as empowering tools. It is by looking at these internet-related anxieties – this paper contends – that we can shed light on the continuing role of printed media within the everyday construction of mediated political action. When I entered fieldwork, I was surprised by the fact that solidarity campaigning organisations and Trade Unions still invested their few economic resources in the production of printed media, despite the number of online platforms available. These printed publications were distributed and exchanged amongst the people involved in Trade Union movement (Trade unionists, MPs, members of the Labour party) and to members and sympathisers of networked organisations. A detailed analysis of the audience is here complicated to convey. This is not only because media producers and readers often overlapped, but also because as Downing (2003) has noticed, it is extremely difficult to provide a detailed analysis of the audience of alternative media which are produced by social movements.

What is important to understand here is the fact that, for these organisations, printed media remained significant platforms for the everyday mediation of political action. Within CSC, for instance, the *CubaSi* Magazine was a fundamental campaigning tool, which was used to organise and promote action and to mediate political beliefs and choices. Despite the many online platforms, therefore, the *CubaSi* magazine still has a crucial importance for the campaign, and people within CSC are committed in continuing producing it. This commitment to the production of their magazine often leads the organisation to economic loss. This can be seen from the 2007 treasurer's report, which shows that the expenditure to produce the magazine was larger than the income (£10,617 versus £8,752). Despite economic loss, however, organisers and full time workers believe in the importance of continuing publishing the *CubaSi*. As explained by the director of the campaign:

CubaSi is one element of what we do as an organisation, is one part, and the website is one bit, the *CubaUpdate* is another bit...But it's a very important bit, and for me it's one of the most important things to be doing. Because without it what are we? This is the voice of what we are, what we do, and everything in it has to represent us.

An interesting aspect that emerged with my research, and that can also be seen in the above extract, was that people related differently to the magazine compared to online media. During fieldwork and interviews I almost reached a stage of data saturation where a great majority of informants claimed that they would never replace the *CubaSi* with an only online version. At the beginning, I thought that the reasons behind such a unanimous attitude had to be found in the fact that a great number of members and organisers within CSC are in their 50s 60s and 70s. This is not surprising since most of the members and organisers are involved within the trade union movement, which as Colgan and Ledwith (2002) have shown is still strongly based on a traditional, male, working-class, middle-aged membership. If we are to base ourselves merely on an age average, the generation issue would seem to be the first reason why people prefer to have a hard copy. Yet I contend that this is a superficial understanding,

because not only were most people I interviewed extremely familiar with ICT, but most importantly the people in their 20s, 30s and 40s had the same attitude.

What emerged from the interviews collected was that, in contrast to the online newsletter, the printed magazine gave people a greater emotional attachment and a feeling of affinity. In this regard the below extract from an interview with Gordon Calliste – a 28 year old activist – is indicative:

V: What do you think of the *CubaSi* magazine?

G: It's very important, you know, I think it brings the subjects of Cuba to life, closer to home and you feel that you are engaging with the issues, that you are up to date with the latest information, and I find it very, very interesting, everything that it's written into it appeals to me.

V: But wouldn't you get the same information on the internet?

G: No, because the articles in the *CubaSi* are brilliant and on the internet you have to look through a lot of s**t before finding some truth. It's a question of quality and perspective. I want to read about Cuba from someone who wants to help Cuba rather than someone who wants to destroy it.

V: Do you read the *CubaUpdate* regularly?

G: Yes

V: And do you feel the *CubaSi* could be transformed in only an online version?

G: I don't want that, I like to have a hard copy, it gives you a sense of ownership, you possess it, you can read it again. I don't like reading on a computer screen. It is easy to spend hours and hours on a computer when you are at work, and I don't want to do that when I come home, I want to relax, it's more pleasant to read an hard copy. Without the *CubaSi* the different members of the campaign wouldn't have so much of a shared community, a representation that keeps them bound together.

A similar line of reasoning can also be found in many other interviews, in which it emerged that the *CubaSi* is crucial to the campaign because it creates a feeling of belonging by always restating an ideal of membership. This understanding is expressed also in an interview with Stephen, a former reporter at the Coventry Telegraph who left his job to work for the Cuba Solidarity Campaign:

S: You can't have some membership organisation without a form of literature that keeps them together.

V: I know, but you have the Cuba Update.

S: Not everyone has access to the internet, especially amongst the poorest and elderly. So you need a magazine through the door. More than that, no matter if members do have computers, reading something on a flickering screen isn't as good as having a magazine with its smell, its feel... and you can read it wherever, and you can store it somewhere. Obviously you can store it in a computer as well, but it becomes a hassle. I think that having a tangible product that people receive is part of the actual thing... of the actual exchange.

The fascinating aspect of the interview extracts presented here is that both interviewees – despite being only in their late 20s – emphasised on the idea of *materiality* in addressing the importance of the *CubaSi*. Furthermore, they related understandings of materiality with notions of ownership, exchange and membership. In fact, according to both of them it seems that the feeling of belonging is given by the material nature of the *CubaSi*, by the fact that it

provides them with something that they can own, archive, feel and smell. The emphasis on the material aspect of the printed media, this paper contends, should be understood in the larger framework of the ambivalent relationship between activists and the internet. Indeed as the director of the campaign explained:

The problem is that the online is so hard to associate with a particular ‘product’, with a particular organisation. You just read it because it’s online, but you can’t really associate it with something. You can’t really have an affinity with anything really. You got your websites, and your newsletters but than you easily can read something else. You don’t stick with it. No one owns the online.

In contrast to online platforms, the ethnographic context of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign shows how printed media create a sense of *ownership* as well as the basis for *exchange* within the campaign. It is by looking at ownership and exchange that we can better understand why people seem not to have the same emotional involvement with their online media as they have for their printed ones. By saying so, however, I do not wish to neglect the many examples of ‘alternative’ media organisations which have developed or preserved their brands in the online world (e.g. Indymedia, or the examples offered by Meikle, 2002). By looking at people’s emotional attachment to the printed media, with reference to notions of ownership and exchange, I wish instead to shed some light on the continuing role of these media forms in the everyday construction of political action. This understanding, I believe, is particularly important because it suggests that new/ digital media are not replacing old/ material ones but - as the emphasis on materiality and belonging has shown - they may be transforming their meaning. This is beautifully expressed in the words of Steve Wilkinson, past editor of the *CubaSi* Magazine and still an active member of CSC:

V: Do you believe, for instance that today the Cuba Update has the same role of the *CubaSi*?

S: ...[silence]...you know it is difficult because you are talking about two different media. There would be here a need to analyse it more carefully. The thing is that printed media is far more permanent. It’s a natural, physical object and therefore it becomes an artefact in itself. The digital is more ephemeral. You might save it amongst files in a computer but it’s not...[pause]. The actual physicality of the magazine makes it become a permanent object, and also becomes collectable, and it becomes a physical record of something that happened. So I think the physicality of the printed media, of the magazine so forth, it’s in a way a more permanent and profound communication, and has a meaning for the members. So it becomes something other rather than the mere information that it contains.

Conclusion

The everyday construction of mediated political action has been deeply transformed by the technological developments of the last fifteen years, and more precisely by the advent of the World Wide Web. As this paper has shown, the internet has become a fundamental domain for political action and media activism, and has transformed the experience of social and political struggles in fascinating and empowering ways. In this respect this paper has shown, with reference to the ethnographic context of the Cuba Solidarity Campaign, how the internet has enabled the consolidation of world-wide networks of communication and action, has

granted people with greater access to governmental and non-governmental institutions, and has facilitated the dissemination and exchange of alternative media messages.

At the same time, it has been argued that the everyday use of the internet as tool for political action gave rise to a series of anxieties, which have transformed people's engagement with alternative media production and media activism in general. By exploring the anxieties associated to the lack of control over messages produced, to the stress created by information overload, or to the too-often individualist ideology of the internet, this paper argued that activists' relationship to internet technologies is a complex and ambivalent one, which is embedded in a double tension of empowerment and frustration.

It is by looking at this ambivalence, this paper contended, that we can better appreciate the continuing importance of printed media in the everyday construction of mediated political action. This is because, by exploring internet related anxieties, social researchers can gain some insight into the way in which new information and communication technologies have transformed people's relationship to their printed media. Indeed as it has been shown that, in contrast to the 'online' – which according to my informants 'no-one owns' - the printed magazine creates a sense of ownership and belonging. It is by looking at the interconnection between materiality, ownership/ exchange and belonging that we can better appreciate the way in which new media have not replaced old media but may have powerfully transformed their meaning.

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