SOCIAL MOVEMENT NETWORKS VIRTUAL AND REAL

Mario Diani

SOCIAL MOVEMENT NETWORKS VIRTUAL AND REAL

Mario Diani

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK[1]

Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of 'computer mediated communication' (or CMC) on political activism and social movements. CMC may be expected to affect collective action by improving the effectiveness of communication and facilitating collective identity and solidarity. However, the heterogeneity of social movements undermines generic arguments and their relationship to CMC. Accordingly, the potential consequences of CMC on three different types of political organizations are discussed: organizations mobilizing mainly participatory resources, organizations focusing on professional resources, and transnational networks. The potential to build 'virtual [social movement] communities' seems highest among sympathizers of movement organizations who act professionally on behalf of causes with vast resonance among the public opinion and low radical potential. All in all, the most distinctive contribution of CMC to social movements still seems to be instrumental rather than symbolic. Existing bonds and solidarities are likely to generate more effective mobilization attempts than was the case before the diffusion of CMC; it is more disputable though as to whether CMC may create brand new social ties where there were none.

Keywords

social movements, social networks, collective identity, virtual communities

INTRODUCTION

The rapidly growing role of 'computer mediated communication' (CMC) has attracted considerable attention from social scientists and generated extensive discussions of its possible impact on social organization (Castells 1996; Wellman *et al*. 1996; Cerulo 1997). In this paper I discuss the possible effects of CMC on social movement activity. CMC represents an unusual form of communication, as it does not really fit conventional distinctions between public and private, and direct and mediated communication. It may be expected to affect collective action in both instrumental and symbolic terms, by improving the effectiveness of communication and creating collective identity and solidarity. At the same time, the heterogeneity of social movements prevents us from formulating generic arguments about their relationship to CMC. Accordingly, I briefly discuss the

potential consequences of CMC on three different types of movement organizations: organizations mobilizing mainly participatory resources, organizations focusing on professional resources, and transnational networks (Tarrow 1998; Diani and Donati 1999). The exercise is merely exploratory. As such, it inevitably touches upon very complex issues in a very cursory way. Still, it identifies a few general criteria for the investigation of the role of social movements in the virtual space, a topic which so far has seen as much and, possibly more, utopian wishful thinking than systematic reasoning.

CMC, POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Social movements can be regarded as networks of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals and organizations, who share a distinctive collective identity, and mobilize resources on conflictual issues (Diani 1992). This definition identifies several dimensions of social movements that CMC may be expected to shape.[2] These include (a) the behaviour of specific movement actors, individuals or organizations; (b) the relations linking individual activists and organizations to each other (Diani 1995; della Porta and Diani 1999: chapter 5); (c) the feelings of mutual identification and solidarity which bond movement actors together and secure the persistence of movements even when specific campaigns are not taking place (Rupp and Taylor 1987; Melucci 1996). Treating movements as networks also makes the relationship between movements and their spatial location most explicit. Contemporary social movements have developed historically in parallel to the emergence of a public sphere located in specific physical and cultural spaces, namely, in societies defined by national boundaries, specific infrastructures and common cultural traits (Tilly 1978; Calhoun 1992; Emirbayer and Sheller 1999; Tarrow 1998).

This view of movements broadens our understanding of the relationship between CMC and movements to include issues of networking and identity building. Potential questions include the following:

- How do forms of individual participation change?
- How do SMOs modify their ways of operating?
- How do individuals and organizations connect to each other to exchange/pool resources and information?
- How do these actors develop identities and solidarities?
- How do the geographical boundaries of the network change, along with the underlying idea of public space?

This is a massive – and admittedly daunting – research programme; in this paper I focus in particular on communication between individuals and organizations, and on the spread of collective identities. I pay hardly any attention to individual participation, nor to broader changes in the public sphere. There are good reasons why CMC should affect political activism significantly. The spread of electronic mail may facilitate communication between local and national branches of the same organization, as well as among the members of local, national and transnational coalitions; it may also strengthen the linkages between individual members and their organizations. Communication technology enables activists to set up discussion groups between individuals interested in a specific issue, thus encouraging interaction and polyadic, rather than dyadic, communication dynamics. Finally, the World Wide Web not only offers the opportunity of making crucial information for campaigners easily accessible from web sites; it also allows the independent existence of 'virtual' forms of co-ordination such as that represented by the Institute for Global Communication (www.igc.org) and its different thematic networks (WomesNet, EcoNet, PeaceNet, LaborNet and ConflictNet).[3]

Potential advantages stemming from CMC include the higher speed and the reduced costs of communication among sometimes very distant actors; the persistent accuracy of the original message and the overcoming of the traditional problem of distortion, so common when communication spreads by way of mouth or through summaries by intermediaries; the potential to promote interaction between branches of organizations and/or movement activists; the opportunity to transform sets of geographically dispersed aggrieved individuals into a densely connected aggrieved population, thus solving one key problem of mobilization (Myers 1994: 252–7; Bonchek 1995; Rheingold 1993: chapter 8).

These traits of CMC surely increase the possibility of launching campaigns on a scale, and with a speed, previously unheard of; but does this entitle us to conclude that we are witnessing the development of new types of actors, rather than the simple growth in the efficiency of social movement action? In particular, should we expect the emergence of new types of 'virtual' social movements, disconnected from a specific location in space and without reference to any specific 'real' community? To address these issues we need a preliminary – if brief – discussion of the peculiarity of CMC *vis a vis* other, more conventional forms of communication.

CMC AND 'CONVENTIONAL' COMMUNICATION

A proper assessment of the impact of CMC requires at least a working typology of communication forms. Mine is based on the distinction between the private or

public nature of communication, namely, its accessibility to third parties; and on its direct or mediated form, where 'direct' means any form of communication based on face-to-face interaction.[4]

Private and direct communication includes all exchanges which take place in the course of face-to-face personal interaction between movement activists; occasions range from confidential meetings – e.g. of leaders or restricted boards – to discussions within primary groups to all those exchanges where information needs to be restricted within the boundaries of the group.

Private and mediated forms include all the occurrences in which transmission of information and ideas occurs through some technical device, regardless of the level of technical sophistication. Examples range from ordinary mail addressed to members/sympathizers, to telephone calls, to use of e-mail messages. The degree of privacy of these forms of communication may be subject to quite substantial variation: for example, many circular letters addressed to the membership of mass organizations are usually drafted in such a way as to allow for the possibility that the content of the message become known beyond its original targets. Still, communication here is not primarily designed, nor organised, to reach a public outside given group or organizational boundaries.

Public and direct communication takes place mostly in public spaces, for example on the occasion of public demonstrations or recruitment initiatives. Public addresses, the distribution of leaflets, the very act of marching in a street carrying banners or placards constitute as many communicative acts which directly (try to) engage the targets of the messages in face-to-face interaction – although the purpose of such activities, and their communicative traits, obviously go beyond direct interaction, aimed as they may be at attracting the mass media's attention too. Direct public communication may also occur in those 'semi-public' spaces which constitute the subcultural fabric of social movements: cultural centres, coffee shops, alternative art venues, community associations, etc. (Polletta 1999). I refer to them as semi-public because while they have no formally restricted access – many of them are in fact not substantially different from ordinary facilities of the same kind – still movement free spaces are often so heavily shaped by their most regular clients' profiles to discourage people with different persuasions and lifestyles from attending them at all.[5]

Finally, *public and mediated* communication includes all media-related forms. These may consist of press releases, advertising and information campaigns – radio and television adverts, paid announcements in newspapers, etc. – but also of careful strategic 'manipulation' of the media through spectacular activities. The selection of movement agendas as well as of their leaders or spokespersons on the basis of their estimated potential impact on the media might also be

regarded as an example – possibly an extreme one – of 'mediated communication' (Gitlin 1980).

CMC stands in a somewhat ambiguous relationship to these forms of communication. Its private or public nature is unclear. On the one hand, it represents a new version of public communication: not only websites, but also discussion lists or e-mail rosters may be accessed with limited efforts (although access to specialized lists may be easier for those who belong to a specific subculture, search engines make the task relatively easy for outsiders too). On the other hand, as long as access to internet technology is heavily skewed in favour of better educated, and/or higher income groups (Norris 1999), then the public nature of CMC may be subject to question (at least by comparison to verbal mass media: printed media in the early, golden – at least by Habermasian standards – age of the public sphere might bear more than a passing analogy to the process of limited access described here).

However, the public nature of CMC is questionable also for another reason, namely, the difficulty to identify the senders of a message as embodied (individual or corporate) actors, with a specific territorial location. Unless they want to be identified, there is no way to break the anonymity of senders of computer-mediated messages. This breaks with the view of the democratic public sphere as a space where information is exchanged and opinions debated, between actors prepared to take responsibility for their stances. In itself, there is nothing new in this: after all, especially – but not exclusively – in authoritarian regimes, dissenters of all sorts have always circulated messages without making themselves identifiable by the public (nor, most importantly, by repressive agencies). What is peculiar, however, is the possibility of reciprocity and interaction that CMC offers on a much larger scale than previous forms of communication. While the leaders and activists of underground guerrillas or other clandestine groups could traditionally be contacted only through difficult, uncertain and potentially dangerous negotiations, and subject to the identification of reliable intermediaries, the process is much easier in the case of CMC: that e-mail addresses can be accessed from any location and are located nowhere enormously facilitates dealings with political actors in hiding. The masterly use of CMC by Deputy-Commander Marcos in Chiapas, and the opportunity it gave him to establish regular e-mail contacts to the media, while remaining inaccessible to his opponents, provides an excellent – if frequently mentioned – example (Castells 1997: 68–84; Knudson 1998).

Likewise, CMC is strictly speaking neither direct nor mediated. On the one hand, the technological medium offers a potential for interaction that other mediated forms of communication largely lack. Exchanges of letters between

different branches of an organization require much longer than similar exchanges on e-mail, to the point of modifying qualitatively the nature of the interaction. More over, in contrast, for example, to telephone communication, which also allows for interaction, CMC – especially in the context of discussion lists – may involve a multiplicity of actors and thus start interactive processes which extend beyond the originators of the exchange. On the other hand, it is disputable whether the warmth and intensity of direct, face-to-face communication may be found in computer-mediated interactions. Although the emotional nature and the depth of virtual experiences and exchanges have been repeatedly underlined (e.g. Turkle 1997; Cerulo and Ruane 1998) it is still unclear to what extent the two experiences can be comparable. This applies particularly to the problem of the sources of trust which are expected to support interaction among people mobilising in social movements.[6] Collective action requires long term commitments and the willingness to engage in projects which rely upon the contribution of all the parties involved for their success; one has to wonder to what extent virtual interactions are capable of generating mutual bindings of the necessary intensity (Calhoun 1998). Accounts of 'virtual communities' also suggest that most interactions taking place in the virtual sphere actually expand on and reinforce face-to-face acquaintances and exchanges, instead of creating new ones (Wellman *et al*. 1996; Virnoche and Marx 1997). The most successful virtual communities seem indeed to be those where people are expected to disclose their personal identity, and where a core group of committed individuals is willing to engage in some form of 'real' as well as 'virtual' interaction (Tranvik 2000).

CMC, COMMUNITY FORMS AND MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

The capacity of CMC to promote forms of direct communication which transcend the constraints of face-to-face interaction and blur the boundaries between the private and the public sphere may be expected to affect how social movements operate. However, the extent of its impact, and its implications, may differ substantially. We can address this issue by looking on the one hand, at the efficacy of existing patterns of communication; on the other hand, at the possible creation of new communication channels and the formation of new identities. Beyond the instrumental contribution to more effective mobilization attempts, the most important question is whether CMC may contribute to 'catness' (Tilly 1978) by transforming mere aggregates of people sharing the same condition into a social network, and thus into a more easily mobilizable group. People exposed to diffused, but in principle individual, grievances, may be expected to profit heavily from the opportunities for connection offered by CMC. Permanently ill people,

disabled people, victims of road accidents, drug addicts and their relatives, experience life conditions which do not automatically entail specific social linkages and are, therefore, difficult to turn into collective demands. In such cases, CMC may provide a powerful boost to the establishing of contacts, and thus to the promotion of collective action. The same may apply to groups with specific socio-economic positions and interests, but whose social and geographical isolation discourages co-ordination – think, for example, of the contribution of CMC to the organizing of American Mid-West farmers (Rheingold 1993: chapter 8).

Any discussion of the impact of CMC has to acknowledge the differentiation in the organizational forms adopted by social movements (or better, by the organized actors operating within them). Although one should not posit a rigid correspondence between organizational and communicative forms, still the different solutions that the former offer to mobilization problems might well reflect variation in the latter. Social movement organizations (SMOs) differ first of all in their *resource mobilization strategies*. Some of them focus on *professional resources* (in turn made available at times from public authorities or private sponsors, but more frequently from sympathizers' membership fees), others on *participatory resources* (Oliver and Marwell 1992; Diani and Donati 1999).

One should also consider the growing role of what I call *transnational networks*, i.e. federations of national chapters (e.g. Friends of Earth International) or coalitions of groups (e.g. the Climate Action Network) mobilizing at a transnational level. Although a significant proportion of NGOs operating at this level have individual members,[7] most do not (and even those who do actually recruit largely through their national branches, see e.g. Greenpeace). This identifies a different set of organizational problems that CMC may be expected to address.

In order to assess the contribution of CMC to mobilization attempts by different types of movement organisations, we also need to allow for differences in the characteristics of the population that social movements want to mobilize. A recent typology of real and virtual community forms (Virnoche and Marx 1997) differentiates between situations in which actors share the same geographical space regularly (e.g. members of urban communities), intermittently (e.g. employees of the same firm, students of the same school, or members of voluntary associations), or never (e.g. people sharing some broad world-views, interests, or concerns, but lacking opportunities for direct, face-to-face interaction). The introduction of CMC in such different contexts generates quite different types of virtual social systems. Virnoche and Marx (1997) refer to them as *community networks, virtual extensions* (of real intermittent communities), and *virtual communities*, characterized by potentially anonymous and purely mediated patterns of interaction.[8]

Movement Organizations Mobilizing Mainly Professional Resources

Many environmental groups with a participatory profile – e.g. WWF or Friends of Earth – have recently assigned a greater role than in the past to restricted groups of professionals, promoting campaigns funded by passive members' contributions.[9] Other examples may include conservation groups like the National Trust or consumers' protection bodies like the Consumers' Association.[10] On the more radical and confrontational side, Greenpeace provides the best example of a 'professional protest organisation' (Diani and Donati 1999). Organizations such as these need to mobilize a membership as large as possible in order to secure the resources to support their professional bodies. All of them address causes which may attract widespread consensus among public opinion and are in principle little controversial – although the specific solutions advocated and, especially in the case of Greenpeace, tactics adopted may actually be strongly controversial. Consistently with their emphasis on professional structures, a large section of these organizations' grassroots constituency is dispersed and not organized, as it includes all individuals sharing similar broad views on a given set of related issues. In this case, while it is important to reach potential constituents quickly and at low cost, there is comparatively little need to develop specific strong identities – precisely because members do not need specific incentives to mobilize directly. CMC may increase the effectiveness of communication to ordinary members, strengthen perhaps their identification by offering some opportunity for a modest involvement in the organization debate, but with no major impact in terms of identity building and maintenance. The most likely outcome of the introduction of CMC is the conversion of dispersed communities of sympathizers into virtual communities with a slightly higher degree of interaction. The efficiency of the headquarters may also be expected to profit from technological innovation, but no substantial change is likely given the already professional nature of the central bodies. CMC is likely to be most important for organizations combining professionalization with confrontational strategies like Greenpeace. Advanced communication technologies may indeed facilitate dramatically the circulation of news which is so essential to Greenpeace's campaigns.

Movement Organizations Mobilizing Mainly Participatory Resources

Here the picture is radically different. The very existence of these organizations is based on the involvement of the grassroots and on the provision of ideological and solidarity incentives to direct action. Standardized communication from

central bodies is usually inadequate in these cases. When mobilization takes place on a national scale it usually relies upon connecting structures provided either by the local branches of the organizations, or (perhaps more frequently) by other types of organizational infrastructures. These may include other types of associations and informal networks operating as 'transmovement free spaces' (i.e. relational contexts in which activists of different movements may come in contact, thus developing a shared understanding which guarantees the continuity of collective action across time and space); or they may consist of 'indigenous networks' (associational networks of all sorts, not directly related to social movements, but which none the less provide the context for social movements to develop – e.g. the Black churches in the 1960s civil rights movement in the USA); or of 'prefigurative networks', countercultural and/or communitarian settings where movement activists and sympathizers experiment with alternative lifestyles.[11] Whatever the specific form of these networks, CMC may be expected to reinforce already existing ties rather than creating new ones.

Sustained collective action is unlikely to originate from purely virtual ties if they are not sustained by previous interaction – as many (e.g. Wellman *et al*. 1996) suggest to be the case most of the time anyway. In Virnoche and Marx's (1997) terms, CMC may be expected to generate community networks – like in the well-known case of Santa Monica, where community virtual networks were behind the successful mobilization for the provision of elementary facilities to homeless and dispossessed people (Rheingold 1993: chapter 8); or virtual extensions, where ties developed through involvement in associational and other direct networks are reinforced by electronic communication.[12]

Transnational Organizations

The impressive growth of movement organizations on a transnational level has been well documented.[13] So has their tendency to operate through coalition and network forms (Sikkink 1993; Smith *et al*. 1997; Tarrow 1998: chapter 11). It is possible to identify several forms of transnational contentious politics. Tarrow defines transnational social movements as 'sustained contentious interactions with opponents – national or nonnational – by connected networks of challengers organized across national boundaries:

> . . . [it] is important . . . that the challengers themselves be both rooted in domestic social networks and connected to one another more than episodically through common ways of seeing the world, or through informal or organizational ties, and that their challenges be contentious in deed as well as in word'

(1998: 184).

Other forms of transnational contention include cross-border protest diffusion (where actors copy from each other but then develop largely independently within their own national boundaries), political exchange ('temporary forms of co-operation among essentially national actors that identify a common interest or set of values in a particular political configuration': 1998: 187) and transnational advocacy networks. These differ from transnational movements in that they lack the embeddedness in dense networks of face to face, daily interaction which is essential to the spread of collective action. In other words, advocacy networks are networks in the sense of connecting structures, but not in the sense of social networks (Tarrow 1998: 188). While it is possible to identify a few genuine transnational movements (e.g. the peace movement in the 1980s, or fundamentalist Islam), they are outnumbered by advocacy networks on environmental, women's or human rights issues (Porter and Brown 1991: 50–9; Smith *et al*. 1997; Webster 1998), usually composed of former militants and activist organizations, who connect to promote shared values yet without any form of grassroots structure (Sikkink 1993: 412). Although these networks may promote the resources for the development of domestic social movements (Tarrow 1998: 192) they should not be regarded as social movements in their own right.

The distinction between movements and other forms of transnational contention is not particularly relevant as far as the practical impact of CMC is concerned. CMC improves the effectiveness of communication dramatically, and in doing so it often makes the very existence of these networks possible.[14] E-mail increases the co-ordination capacity of groups co-operating on both broadbased campaigns like those on global warming or Third World debt and on initiatives targeting specific companies or governments. Some organizations actually conduct most of their business by e-mail, including decision-making processes (one example being the Climate Action Network, a coalition of environmental and scientific associations concerned with issues of global warming and pollution).[15]

The distinction is more important from the point of view of identity construction. What Tarrow calls 'transnational social movements' are affected by CMC in a similar way as participatory movements operating within national boundaries and facing the problem of mobilizing their own constituency. As for 'advocacy networks', CMC may strengthen identities and solidarities among their members by increasing the rate of exchange between geographically very distant activists and organizations, and therefore the density of what is, however, a very peculiar constituency. Its peculiarity lies first of all in being an elite of mostly professional campaigners rather than a sector of a 'transnational public opinion'

in the broader and more conventional sense of the term. Accordingly, this prefigures a pattern of computer mediated interaction which is proximate to the 'virtual extension' model rather than to the 'virtual communities' one. Although members of the transnational NGO sector do not strictly interact on an everyday basis, they none-the-less have fairly regular opportunities for direct face-to-face interaction on the occasion of international conferences and other related meetings – not to mention the ties originating from previous shared professional or educational backgrounds (McAdam and Rucht 1993).[16]

CMC, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE EMERGENCE OF VIRTUAL SOCIETY

It has frequently been suggested that CMC will dramatically affect a whole range of fundamental human activities, from work organization (e.g. through telecommuting) to democratic procedures (as reflected in the advent of 'electronic democracy') to the multiplication of personal identities and the self (for summaries of the debate: Rheingold 1993; Friedland 1996; Hacker 1996; Wellman *et al*. 1996; Purcell 1997; Turkle 1997). In relation to political and social participation, we may safely expect CMC to operate as a powerful facilitator through 'the maintenance of dispersed face-to-face networks', the development of cultural and 'socio-spatial enclaves' and the technical support to interest group activity (Calhoun 1998: 383–5). However, its contribution to the creation of new types of communities, and to the spread of new democratic practices based on principles of discursiveness and consultation, is far from clear. First of all, most examples of personal interaction in electronic discussion groups actually miss some of the requirements usually associated with the idea of community. Participants in those lists often hide their personal identity, participate occasionally, are not tied in any sort of committed relationship and are mostly involved in dyadic or at most triadic interactions (Calhoun 1998: 380; Tranvik 2000). Moreover, examples of community networks, such as WELL in the Bay Area or the Santa Monica network, suggest that virtual networks operate at their best when they are backed by real social linkages in specifically localized communities, while their capacity to create brand new ones is uncertain (Virnoche and Marx 1997; Pickerill 2000). Finally, the overall democratizing impact of CMC may be severely hampered by two types of resource constraints: while its contribution to networking among citizens' organizations is undeniable, its contribution to the operations of social control agencies, the military, governments and corporations is – at least quantitatively – much greater; and access to CMC is at least for the time being heavily correlated to class and status (Norris 1999). In sum,

CMC seems to reflect inequality rather than overcome it (Calhoun 1998: 381; Myers 1994; Friedland 1996; Hacker 1996).

The pessimism of some critics (e.g. Calhoun 1998) may be excessive. The speed at which CMC is spreading in the USA and other Western countries leads one to wonder for how long CMC will remain inaccessible to lower-income social groups; nor should one discount the possibility that CMC affect power holders' and challengers' opportunities in different ways – by incrementally increasing the former's control capacity, while opening up largely new opportunities to the latter. This would qualify the claim that CMC merely reflects existing balances of power. Still, there are some reasons for caution. The potential to build 'virtual [social movement] communities' seems highest among sympathizers of movement organizations who act mostly on a professional basis and on behalf of causes with a vast resonance among the public opinion – whose radical, if not 'revolutionary', potential is in other words relatively modest. As the collective identity develops in relation to issues which are largely consensual, at least among Western publics (like the environment), the level of mutual trust required among movement sympathizers tends to be low. A virtual community is therefore more likely to develop even in the absence of direct ties, which are usually regarded as sources of stronger interpersonal trust (Putnam 1995).

By contrast, participatory movement organizations – especially the most radical – are more dependent upon direct, face-to-face interactions, both for the purpose of recruiting members and securing their commitment. Engaging in what are potentially high-risk activities requires a level of trust and collective identification which is unlikely to develop if not supported by face-to-face interaction (della Porta 1988). Accordingly, the use of CMC may be expected to generate mostly 'community networks' or 'virtual extensions'. Even transnational networks seem to take the form of 'virtual extensions' rather than 'virtual communities', given their reliance on a small elite of strongly connected activists. All in all, the most distinctive contribution of CMC to social movements so far seems to be of an instrumental rather than symbolic kind (see also Bonchek 1995; Pickerill 2000). Existing bonds and solidarities are likely to result in more effective mobilization attempts than it was the case before the diffusion of CMC; it is more disputable, though, whether CMC may create brand new social ties where there were none before.

Mario Diani
Department of Government
University of Strathclyde
16 Richmond St
Glasgow
G1 1XQ, UK
mario.diani@strath.ac.uk

N O T E S

1 Earlier versions of this argument were presented at the 'A New Politics?' Conference, CCSS, University of Birmingham, 16–17 September 1999, and at the 'La democrazia nell'era della CNN' conference, University of Padua, Italy, 25–27 May 2000. I'm grateful to the organizers of these meetings, Frank Webster and Gustavo Guizzardi, and the other participants for their critical remarks.

2 Although this view of movements has been proposed as a synthesis of approaches focusing on the Western historical experience, recent research suggests it might well apply to collective action in other areas of the globe (Foweraker 1995; Desai 1996; Kurzman 1998; Rothman and Oliver 1999).

3 Myers (1994) presents a broad overview of these themes.

4 Snow *et al*. (1980) and Cerulo and Ruane (1998) present a sophisticated typology of forms of interaction which goes beyond simple dichotomies like direct vs mediated.

5 For example, despite their cultural activities being in principle open to the public at large, autonomous youth centres in Italy (Lumley 1990; Dines 2000) or in Germany (von Dirke 1997) may be characterized in this way given their pronounced countercultural profile.

6 Tranvik (2000) presents a general discussion of the relationship between CMC and the creation of social capital.

7 About 20 per cent according to a recent survey (Smith 1997: 52–3).

8 Another typology differentiates between economic, functional, territorial and extra-territorial communities (Tranvik 2000).

9 Diani and Donati (1999). The extent of the professionalization of these groups is however a matter of dispute, as the characterization of Friends of Earth as a 'protest business' (Jordan and Maloney 1997) is at odds with analyses documenting the persistent role of local chapters and grassroots initiatives within the same organization (Washbourne 1999).

10 None of the examples mentioned totally rules out ordinary members' active participation. But their role is fairly limited by comparison to the role of professional bodies at the centre.

11 I borrow this typology of 'free spaces' from Polletta (1999). For earlier theoretical arguments and extended illustrations see Rupp and Taylor (1987), Roseneil (1995), Whittier (1995) and Melucci (1996).

12 Someone could wonder how do phenomena like the use of the internet by extreme right groups fit this picture, as this seems to generate extensive patterns of linkages between previously isolated individuals (Bonchek 1995). The question is, though, to which extent do these virtual linkages translate into direct action and not simply in manifestations of support. Previous research on recruitment to terrorist activities underlines the important role of face to face networks (della Porta 1988). Do virtual linkages operate in the same direction by facilitating the involvement of otherwise isolated individuals into high-risk radical activities? We need more solid evidence to address this question (Bonchek 1995).

13 Using the *Yearbook of International Organisations* as her source, Smith (1997: 47) identifies 183 transnational movement organisations in 1973, 348 in 1983 and 631 in 1993.

14 It is worth noting, though, that even transnational forms of campaigning are far from new in absolute terms, as nineteenth-century anti-slavery and Irish nationalist mobilizations suggest (d'Anjou and van Male 1998; Hanagan 1998).

15 Pickerill (2000) offers a broad overview of uses of CMC by environmental organizations, both nationally and transnationally.

16 A very distinctive version of this type is represented by virtual networks of extremist organizations, e.g. neo-nazi groups seem to rely extensively upon the anonymity guaranteed by CMC to exchange information and co-ordinate violent campaigns across borders. As already noticed, we do not have enough evidence to date to assess whether we are facing mainly 'virtual extension' or 'virtual communities' processes.

REFERENCES

Bonchek, M. (1995) 'Grassroots in Cyberspace: Recruiting Members on the Internet', paper for the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago.

Calhoun, C. (ed.) (1992) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA/ London: MIT Press.

Calhoun, C. (1998) 'Community without propinquity revisited: communication technology and the transformation of the urban public sphere', *Sociological Inquiry*, 68: 373–97.

Castells, M. (1996) *The Information Age. Vol.I: The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (1997) *The Information Age. Vol.II: The Power of Identity*, Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Cerulo, K. and Ruane, J. M. (1997) 'Reframing sociological concepts for a brave new (virtual?) world', *Sociological Inquiry*, 67: 48–58.

Cerulo, K. and Ruane, J. M. (1998) 'Coming together: new taxonomies for the analysis of social relations', *Sociological Inquiry*, 68: 398–425.

d'Anjou, L. and van Male, J. (1998) 'Between the old and new: social movements and cultural change', *Mobilization*, 3: 207–26.

della Porta, D. (1988) 'Recruitment processes in clandestine political organisations: Italian left-wing terrorism', in B. Klandermans, K. Kriesi and S. Tarrow (eds) *From Structure to Action*, Greenwich: JAI Press, pp.155–69

della Porta, D. and Diani, M. (1999) *Social Movements*, Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Desai, M. (1996) 'Informal organizations as agents of change: notes from the contemporary women's movement in India', *Mobilization*, 1: 159–73.

Diani, M. (1992a) 'The concept of social movement', *Sociological Review*, 40: 1–25.

Diani, M. (1995) *Green Networks. A Structural Analysis of the Italian Environmental Movement*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Diani, M. and Donati, P. R. (1999) 'Organizational change in Western European environmental groups: a framework for analysis', *Environmental Politics*, 8: 13–34.

Dines, N. (2000) 'I Centri Sociali', *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 23: 90–11.

Emirbayer, M. and Sheller, M. (1999) 'Publics in History', *Theory and Society*, 28: 145–97.

Foweraker, J. (1995) *Theorizing Social Movements*, London: Pluto.

Friedland, L. A. (1996) 'Electronic democracy and the new citizenship', *Media, Culture and Society*, 18: 185–212.

Gitlin, T. (1980) *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Hacker, K. L. (1996) 'Missing links in the evolution of electronic democratization', *Media, Culture and Society*, 18: 213–32.

Hanagan, M. (1998) 'Irish transnational social movements, deterritorialized migrants, and the state system: the last one hundred and forty years', *Mobilization*, 3: 107–26.

Jordan, G. and Maloney, W. (1997) *The Protest Business*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Knudson, J. (1998) 'Rebellion in Chiapas: insurrection by internet and public relations', *Media, Culture, and Society*, 20: 507–18.

Kurzman, C. (1998) 'Organizational opportunity and social movement mobilization: a comparative analysis of four religious movements', *Mobilization*, 3: 23–50.

Lumley, R. (1990) *States of Emergency*, London: Verso.

McAdam, D. and Rucht, D. (1993) 'The cross-national diffusion of movement ideas', *Annals of the AAPSS*, 528: 56–74.

Melucci, A. (1996) *Challenging Codes*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press.

Myers, D. J. (1994) 'Communication technology and social movements: contributions of computer networks to activism.' *Social Science Computer Review*, 12: 250–60.

Norris, P. (1999) 'Who Surfs Cafe Europa?', Paper for the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta.

Oliver, P. and Marwell, G. (1992) 'Mobilizing technologies for collective action', in A. Morris and C. McClurg Mueller (eds) *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, New Haven: Yale University Press, pp.251–72.

Pickerill, J. (2000) 'Environmentalism and the net: pressure groups, new social movements and new ICTs', in R. Gibson and S. Ward (eds) *Reinvigorating Government? British Politics and the Internet*, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 129–150.

Polletta, F. (1999) '"Free spaces" in collective action', *Theory and Society*, 28: 1–38.

Porter, G. and Welsh Brown, J. (1991) *Global Environmental Politics*, Boulder, CO/London: Westview Press.

Purcell, K. (1997) 'Towards a communication dialectic: embedded technology and the enhancement of place', *Sociological Inquiry*, 67: 101–12.

Putnam, R. D. (1995) 'Bowling alone: America's declining social capital', *Journal of Democracy*, 6: 65–78.

Rheingold, H. (1993) *The Virtual Community*, New York: Harper.

Roseneil, S. (1995) *Disarming Patriarchy*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Rothman, F. D. and Oliver, P. (1999) 'From local to global: the anti-dam movement in southern Brazil, 1979–1992', *Mobilization*, 4: 41–58.

Rupp, L. and Taylor, V. (1987) *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Sikkink, K. (1993) 'Human rights, principled issue-networks, and sovereignty in Latin America', *International Organization*, 47: 411–41.

Smith, J. (1997) 'Characteristics of the modern transnational social movement sector', in J. Smith, C. Chatfield and R. Pagnucco (eds) *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, pp. 42–58.

Smith, J., Chatfield, C. and Pagnucco, R. (eds) (1997) *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics. Solidarity Beyond the State*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Snow, D. A., Zurcher, L. A. and Ekland-Olson, S. (1980) 'Social networks and social movements: a microstructural approach to differential recruitment', *American Sociological Review*, 45: 787–801.

Tarrow, S. (1998) *Power in Movement. Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (2nd edn) New York/Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tilly, C. (1978) *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Tranvik, T. (2000) 'Surfing Together and the Rise of Social Capital?', paper for the 'Investigating Social Capital' Conference, Solstrand, Norway, 18–21 May.

Turkle, S. (1997) 'Multiple subjectivity and virtual community at the end of the Freudian century', *Sociological Inquiry*, 67: 72–84.

Virnoche, M. and Marx, G. (1997) '"Only Connect" – E.M. Forster in an age of electronic communication: computer-mediated association and community networks', *Sociological Inquiry*, 67: 85–100.

von Dirke, S. (1997) *All the Power to the Imagination! the West German Counterculture From the Student Movement to the Greens*, Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press.

Washbourne, N. J. (1999) 'New Forms of Organizing? Translocalism, Networks and Organizing in FoE', paper for the 'A New Politics?' Conference, University of Birmingham, 16–17 September.

Webster, R. (1998) 'Environmental collective action: stable patterns of cooperation and issue alliances at the European level', in J. Greenwood and M. Aspinwall (eds) *Collective Action in the European Union*, London: Routledge, pp. 176–95

Wellman, B., Salaff, J. *et al.* (1996) 'Computer networks as social networks: collaborative work, telework, and virtual community', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 22: 213–38.

Whittier, N. (1995) *Feminist Generations. The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.