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**Environmental Activism And The Internet**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master Of Arts in Sociology at Massey University**

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## Abstract

Environmentalism is used as a case study to investigate the value of the Internet for activism, protest and social change. The effectiveness of the Internet for helping environmental groups to achieve their goals and the implications of this medium for the future of the environmental movement are explored.

An online (Internet) survey of environmental groups who are currently using the Internet was conducted. Two hundred and forty four requests to take part were emailed to environmental groups, eight of which were returned with invalid email addresses. Over the course of a three month period 79 completed surveys were collected, giving a response rate of 33%. Other methods utilised include face-to-face, telephone and email interviews with environmental group representatives, content analysis of Internet sites and the construction of a database of online environmental groups. Secondary data is also drawn upon extensively.

This thesis examines the Internet's role in helping environmentalists achieve more with limited resources, network across wide geographic distances and create new forms of collective action. The changing role of other media and the ways in which the Internet may be influencing the dynamics between environmental groups and their opponents are also explored.

Difficulties with this mode of communication must also be acknowledged. The concentration of Internet use in already privileged sectors of society may mean that participants in mainstream environmentalism are likely to have access, but it may also mean that the medium holds less promise for emerging ecojustice groups. It is also true that computers and network infrastructures are major causes of environmental harm, so it may appear contradictory to use these to try to protect the environment.

This research suggests that the Internet offers a great deal of opportunity for environmental groups, but it also supports elements of contemporary society that many environmentalists oppose – increased consumerism, unfettered globalisation and direct environmental harm by its very existence.

Activists should approach the Internet with optimism but not complacency. Those who seek to preserve aspects of the medium that promote community and democracy should endeavour to advance an alternative construction of the medium to that which is prevalent in the mainstream media.

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## Chapter 1: Introductory Overview

Since the emergence of the early geographically dispersed computer networks which evolved into the Internet, people have contemplated the potential of this new technology for social change and resistance (Rheingold 1994). In some ways, the early ecology of the Internet and other computer networks was well suited to particular types of activism – the sense of an in-group, working underground in a space that normal members of society could not access. Various groups quickly began to utilise computer networks for these purposes (Rittner 1992). Online “communities” of people coming together because of shared interests became a common activity on computer networks long before the flourishing of online advertising or e-commerce (Rheingold 1994a). The relative freedom from the intrusion of advertising, the ability for many-to-many communication, and the unregulated nature of these early networks led a number of commentators to speak enthusiastically about the implications for activism and democracy (for examples see Winner 1986). Today the vision of the Internet as a subversive vehicle for free-speech remains (see Internet World 1999: WWW), but this is giving way to an acceptance of the medium as a new outlet for passive entertainment and consumer gratification (Schiller 1999: 121).

*Many now suggest that the environmental movement has not lived up to the hopes and promises of the first Earth Day of 1970 (Dowie 1995, Rowell 1996, Brick 1998). Some believe that it has run out of steam, toppled under its own weight, become trapped under the thumb of those who it should be opposing (Tokar 1997), become harder for people to identify with, and / or failed to provide workable solutions. It is debatable whether each of the specific criticisms leveled against the movement is fair, but on the basis of numerous criteria it can be shown that what has been achieved on a practical level falls far short of the expectations of the 1970's. Many now argue that the movement needs to reinvent itself and find new direction by learning from the mistakes of the past. Various commentators say that the movement needs to understand that the drive for environmental solutions may come from sectors of society that have not traditionally taken part in the movement, that new strategies need to be developed to counter the organised backlash against environmental ideas and actions, and that problems with addressing environmental issues through mainstream media outlets need to be addressed (Dowie 1995, Beder 1997, Rowell 1996, Brick 1998, Stauber & Rampton 1995).*

The absorption of both the Internet and the environmental movement into mainstream society has had fundamental and far-reaching effects for each of these phenomena. In recent years the Internet has been transformed from an underground project designed to maintain American communications in the event of nuclear apocalypse, to the domain of a small number of technophiles, to being seen as an integral component of mainstream communication.

Likewise, the idea that we must act to save our environment has ceased to be considered radical by most in Western societies, and has become a recurrent issue in government rhetoric, corporate marketing strategies, education and numerous other facets of the public domain.

The ease and ever decreasing cost at which an individual can obtain access to the Internet would appear to fit well with the hopes of those who believe that this medium could facilitate a more democratic, politically participatory society. Similarly, the ubiquity of references to environmental concerns would seem to bode well for a new environmentally conscious world. However it should not immediately be assumed that people *are* more politically active simply because the Internet *can* be used for political and social change purposes, and that its use is widespread. Neither should it be assumed that just because the environment is being talked about, significant changes are being made or even that a significant discursive shift has occurred in terms of the way people view their position in the physical world. The Internet and environmental ideas have not simply impacted upon existing discourses, structures of power and social hierarchies – both have become part of these things, to some degree reshaping them, and in other ways being reinvented themselves to reinforce existing patterns.

Environmentalists were among the first to utilise the Internet. Those in academic and scientific institutions who had access to the technology relished the opportunity to network with others who held similar views (Rheingold 1994: 262). However during the last five to ten years, the Internet has changed dramatically – or perhaps more accurately, the Internet's role in society has been transformed. The opening up of the Internet to increasingly wide sectors of society has meant that a similarly broad cross-section of environmental groups have begun to adopt the medium. This thesis looks at the ways in which various environmental groups are utilising the Internet, examines how the Internet may have changed the manner in which these groups operate, and seeks to understand the extent to which the Internet may help them to be more effective in achieving their goals.

## 1.1 Objectives

The study was restricted to one category of protest and activism because of the necessity to confine the scope of the research. Environmental activism was chosen because:

- The environmental movement incorporates a broad variety of groups and organisations, in terms of philosophies and values, organisational structure, size of membership and geographic scope.

- Environmentalism relates to a wide range of other struggles (such as economic justice). This may increase the relevance of the research to groups involved in other forms of electronic activism.
- Some sectors of the environmental movement have traditionally been proficient in the use of technology, and there are a large number of examples of environmental groups who are using the Internet. At the same time, some environmentalists have had very little experience using computers, and the research also sought to find out how these groups fared on the Internet.

The objectives of this study are to:

1. explore competing ideas about the potential of the Internet for democracy, using environmentalism as an example, and
2. produce outputs which will be useful to environmentalists who use or aim to use the Internet.

This means that in addition to examining broad issues relating to the meaning of this technology for society, the research has been designed to benefit the populations that are the focus of the study. It is hoped that the findings of this research will have the potential to help organisations, collectives and individuals develop Internet strategies which take into account the issues examined herein, in order to best utilise this medium for their purposes.

## 1.2 Research Questions

### 1.2.1 Primary Research Question

This thesis aims to address the following question:

*How effective is the Internet in achieving the outcomes for which environmental groups put it to use?*

The analysis and discussion presented here can only give partial answers based on the reported experiences of a relatively small number of groups. Also, “effectiveness” is not something which can simplistically be assessed. It can be measured on a range of different levels and on the basis of numerous criteria which vary widely between individual groups. For these reasons this research does not seek to provide definitive answers to this question, but rather to approach it from a number of angles, and to examine various trends and influences which may build part of a wider picture.

## 1.2.2 Secondary Research Questions

The secondary research questions are all designed to contribute to the main question by addressing certain aspects:

- For what reasons do environmentalists choose to use the Internet?
- Why do environmental groups choose to use certain forms of Internet communication?
- What types of results do they expect to get from each type of Internet communication (such as their own web pages, newsgroups, email, the Internet as a source of information?)
- Do environmental groups consider the effectiveness of their Internet use, and do they have a means for measuring this?
- From their own experience, does the Internet measure up to the expectations environmental groups had when they began using the Internet? Does it measure up to portrayals in the media?
- Do environmental groups consider the wider implications of using the Internet, or mainly immediate pragmatic purposes?
- In what ways might the Internet be more or less effective for environmental groups than they perceive it to be?
- Aside from the effectiveness of Internet use for particular purposes, are there other issues that might relate to the wider goals of these groups that need to be considered?

## 1.3 Definitions

### *The Internet (The Net)*

When two or more computers are connected so that information can be exchanged between them, a network is formed. The term “internet” refers to a network of networks interconnected with routers (a device which forwards traffic between networks). *The Internet* (capital “I”) is the largest internet in the world. It is a three level hierarchy composed of backbone networks, mid-level networks and stub networks (local networks that do not carry external information)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ohio State University <http://www.cis.ohio-state.edu/htbin/rfc/rfc1983.html>.

The Internet can be defined in terms of the global address systems and information transfer protocols which allow computers to find each other and exchange information through this huge worldwide network. It also includes communication services which employ extensions or additions to these protocols, but which rely upon the basic network.

A number of forms of electronic communication exist on the Internet, including the World Wide Web, email, gophers, ftp (file transfer protocol) archives, newsgroups, and real time chat. Some of these are defined in Appendix 1.

“The Internet” is also often shortened to “the Net”; this convention is adopted at times in this report.

### ***Environmental Groups And Environmental Activism***

Within the context of this thesis an environmental group will be defined as:

*any non-governmental, non-commercial collective whose primary goal is the protection of the environment.*

It should be noted that this does limit the boundaries of the study to *organisations* per se. The connotations behind the term “organisation” do not fit the structure or philosophy of some of the groups or collective actions examined, and some state explicitly that they are *not* an organisation. This is perhaps of particular importance given the focus on the Internet, a medium which some claim greatly facilitates the collective action of people with common beliefs and goals without the need to construct bureaucratic mechanisms of administration and control.

Some environmentalists are not comfortable even with the term *group* to describe their collective activities. This term will be used throughout this thesis for want of a better word to represent the diversity of collective environmental activities, but readers should bear in mind that some of the connotations the word carries are not always applicable.

Furthermore, what constitutes *the protection of the environment* is by no means uncontested. This will necessarily have to be left fairly open to ensure that the study is inclusive of the diversity of environmental philosophies which exist (although this does exclude organisations who cynically use the rhetoric of environmental protection while actually pursuing an agenda which contradicts such claims).



This study is restricted to groups that are already using the Internet. This means that there is little scope for a comparative analysis between offline and online groups. However it was decided that, given limitations in time and resources, a more robust approach would be to focus only on the population utilising the Internet. Due to the fact that many environmental groups have started using the Internet very recently, some comparison can be made based on perceptions of the changes that have occurred since going online.

## ***Environmental Movement***

At some points in this thesis the *environmental movement* will be referred to. This implicates the combined actions and philosophies of all environmentalists and environmental groups. The value of such a concept is limited because the diversity of ideas and efforts encompassed by this overarching term would suggest that there is no singular movement, but many micro-movements. However, it is useful to describe generalised trends in environmentalism, and to move the analysis to a level where explanations of the wax and wane of particular types of environmentalism over certain periods and in certain places can be attempted. An approach that considered every micro-instance of the environmental movement as an isolated specimen, uninfluenced by the whole, would be as disingenuous as an approach which assumes the environmental movement to be a monolithic, mono-directional phenomenon. For this reason this study will move in between these types of approaches, at times seeking to identify the overarching forces which shape “the movement”, but also recognising that the actions of individual groups are not entirely determined by these forces. Certain instances of the environmental movement will also be referred to, for example the *American environmental movement* in the 1970s.

## **1.4 Key Themes**

This study examines whether the Internet is influencing the effectiveness of environmental groups from a range of perspectives. In doing so it explores a number of issues relating to the role of computer mediated communication in contemporary society. Some of these issues are briefly outlined below.

### **1.4.1 Networking And Publicity**

This thesis examines the Internet’s role in two broad areas where information strategies are a concern for environmentalists – networking and publicity. Networking involves the exchange of information between people who are already affiliated in some way with the group or movement (for example within the organisation, between members or participants, or between various environmental groups).

Publicity orientated information is aimed at communicating the message of the group or movement to a wider audience. This type of communication is hugely important for environmentalists, and many groups' activities are aimed largely at gaining exposure in the mainstream media. This media exposure usually seeks to either change the actions of individuals, or mobilise individuals to put pressure on political representatives and others in positions of power. However it can be interpreted more generally as part of a discursive struggle over the definition of "the environment" and surrounding issues.

The potential of the Internet to improve the networking capacity of environmental groups is important because the interconnectedness within and between groups may be essential to the success of the movement. On an immediate and practical level it means that groups can get more done with the available resources. On a wider level this interconnectedness is what differentiates a large number of dispersed individuals who hold similar views, and a worldwide movement capable of inducing significant change.

#### **1.4.2 Conflict And Power**

People seeking to protect some aspect of the environment are often in conflict with another sector, or sectors, of society. There are three primary reasons why it is those in positions of power who tend to oppose the changes argued for by environmentalists. The first is that environmental protection often involves restrictions upon the mechanisms of production and consumption of resources, meaning that profits are threatened. Secondly, the measures environmentalists would like to have put in place sometimes challenge the social status quo, and threaten the hierarchies of which current power-holders are at the apex. Finally, those in positions of power have the most resources available to oppose environmental reform, so their interests are more likely to be protected than those of small unempowered communities.

At times environmental groups have been opposed by those at the opposite end of the power / wealth scale. For example, environmental reforms may threaten the livelihood of people in poor communities, and environmentalists have not always been sensitive to these human consequences. However there is increasing recognition within both environmental and social justice movements that the same social, economic and political structures which are leading to the destruction of the environment are also permitting the exploitation of the poor and oppressed (Dowie 1995: 141, Kaimowitz 1996: 31).

This study recognises that environmental gains achieved through the Internet are also likely to be met with opposition on the Internet. If the Internet is likely to significantly alter the marginalised status of environmentalists and environmental rhetoric, it will have to do more than merely provide a set of useful tools for campaigners – it will need to alter the *balance of power* between environmental groups and their opposition.

The potential of the *Internet* to do this is explored in Chapter 6.

### **1.4.3 Other Media And The Internet**

The potential of the Internet to help environmental groups publicise their cause is important because achieving change usually requires widespread public support. For a variety of reasons other media forms rarely provide an ideal forum for environmental debates.

The limitations of established media are discussed in Chapter 4, and questions relating to whether Internet communication is likely to help overcome these limitations are asked. Structures of power which exist on the Internet are examined, and consideration is given to how this is likely to effect the plight of environmental groups using the net. For example, many of the “areas” of the Internet which attract mass audiences comparable to the audience needed to sustain a mainstream media outlet are often owned by the same companies who already have stakes in other media entities. Such factors need to be weighed against other characteristics of the Internet, such as the ability of anyone to make information available to a *potentially* huge audience.

### **1.4.4 The Internet As A Discursive Construct**

Within the decade or so over which the Internet has evolved into an integral part of mainstream western societies (see Guardian Weekly 1999: 14), a number of narratives have emerged through which the “reality” of this elusive phenomenon can be imagined. These stories play an important part in the way in which we perceive the Internet fits into our lives. The contrasting constructions presented by those of different backgrounds and world views, who have gone onto the Net for different reasons and had varying experiences online (or who have never used the Internet, but whose impressions are shaped by the media and accounts of others) represent competing truths as to the fundamental nature of the Internet.

One point that is argued in this thesis is that peoples’ understanding of what the Internet is, and the role it plays in their lives and society, has important implications for its effectiveness as a medium for activism. If people perceive the Internet as a tool for political participation, a means for challenging structures of power, and for overcoming inequalities built into other auspices of society, then the technology may have potential for progressive social transformation. On the other hand, if people accept the Internet as a passive entertainment medium, a form of hyper-television, and an easy access global shopping mall, then its use is likely to reflect this perception, and the Internet may merely retrench existing ways of life. In actuality, both of these portrayals, and many others, are prevalent. At times they interact in ways that are ironic or contradictory – for example people may be attracted to the Net because they view it as radical and subversive, but adopt a very passive pattern of use.

## 1.5 Elusive Objectivity And Positioning Of The Researcher

No research can ever be completely objective or free from political bias. To make a claim of objectivity is merely to disguise the implicit bias, and to give up all chances of an investigation which is reflexive on that bias. It is also likely to advantage dominant modes of thought, as supposedly objective accounts often draw on taken for granted, 'common sense' belief systems without questioning the precepts behind such assumptions.

However the acceptance that we can not achieve perfect objectivity does not necessitate descending into an uninformed political rant. As Terry Eagleton points out:

*It is ... a simple sleight-of-hand, or sheer intellectual disingenuousness, to imagine that all language is rhetorical to the same degree. (1991: 201)*

Particular political perspectives underlie this work. By recognising and referring to personal beliefs and leanings the author hopes to demonstrate that he is aware that different perspectives exist, and to remain able to give due attention to these. This awareness has guided the research process, in that care has been taken not to base research instruments on unwarranted assumptions.

### 1.5.1 The Researcher's Views On Environmental Activism

This work is written from a position that views the environmental movement as being a vital component of both global and local politics, and one of the most crucial struggles of our times. There are several rationale which underlie this researcher-bias:

1. A belief that the degradation of the environment has a direct and enormous impact upon people's health, quality of life and survival, and that those for whom that impact is most acute are likely to be populations who suffer the most from other forms of oppression.
2. Sympathy for an ecological view of the world which sees humans as being located within, rather than standing above, systems of life.
3. An aversion towards the right-wing ideologies and structures of domination that many components of the environmental movement oppose.

Therefore this work is written from a particular position, and one which, it is conceded, may not be defensible in absolute terms. A rigorous discussion of the value of environmentalism is not undertaken here as this is tangential to the topic and therefore beyond the scope of this thesis.

Throughout the report all efforts are made to remain critical of this and other perspectives.

## **1.6 Thesis Structure**

This introductory section has outlined the objectives of the research, presented some key issues, and defined central terms. Chapter 2 further contextualises the research in relation to current debates about discourse, relativism and the possibility of “truth.” This has important implications for discussions concerning environmental issues, since environmental claims invariably seek some form of empirical grounding.

Chapter 3 outlines the methods used to collect the empirical information used throughout this thesis. Chapter 4 provides a contextual overview of the environmental movement and some of the challenges it faces. An analysis of the general effectiveness of the Internet for environmentalists is undertaken in Chapter 5. Drawing on theories relating to the ownership and control of the media posited by commentators such as Chomsky, Chapter 6 explores the changing role of other media as new opportunities emerge through the Internet. Chapter 7 explores the possibility of the Internet effecting the dynamics between environmentalists and anti-environmental ideologies. Here writers such as Beder (1997), Stauber and Rampton (1995), and Rowel (1996) are drawn upon. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the implications of findings for the environmental movement.