

2006

## Cyberactivism : Public relations in a wired world

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# CYBERACTIVISM

PUBLIC RELATIONS

— in a —

WIRED WORLD

by

**Shane Newton**

This thesis is presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Communications Honours

Submitted to the Faculty of Education and Arts  
School of Communications and Contemporary Arts  
Edith Cowan University

December 2006

# Abstract

Computer-mediated communication has revolutionised the way activist groups influence the opinion of corporations, governments and the community. It has never been so cheap or convenient to publish high-quality material to push a specific issue or cause. Activists are no longer restricted to satisfy the news values of media corporations to reach wide publics. Nor do these businesses (or governments) have any apparent advantage, despite their more economically sustainable and highly-resourced positions.

Current literature is able to examine and explore how the Internet is used and the problems involved, yet much research fails to examine how these constraints and opportunities are negotiated and embraced by users. This thesis provides a window to the use of computer-mediated-communication within three activist groups, and explores how cyberactivist organisations use the Internet, and how this use influences their capacity to communicate, articulate problems, mobilise resources and maintain relationships within a public relations framework.

Activist groups advocate for the implementation of change and have the power to affect an organisations ability to accomplish its goals and missions. As a result, research on activism has become an important aspect of public relations research. Activists represent articulate and vigilant publics who can organise sustained and effective action on diverse issues; yet dominant public relations literature views activists as 'the enemy' of the corporate world.

The rise of the networked world has shifted the social and political configurations of the twenty-first century, creating new ways of understanding power and change. From all over the world, activism and cyberactivism will increasingly contribute to shaping those changes.

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# Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Debra Mayrhofer. Without her commonsense, knowledge, perceptiveness and cracking-of-the-whip I would never have finished.

Dr Mardie O'Sullivan for encouraging me to take the first step and for her undivided support and advice throughout all of my academic studies.

Richard Goodwin, for constant support and guidance, especially when it was needed most.

Luke Collins for inspiration, invaluable advice and recommendations. I am truly grateful.

My nan and grandfathers - my pillars of strength who have shown me what perseverance, unrelenting determination and hard work can achieve. This one is for you.

Lastly, and most importantly, I am forever indebted to my parents for their endless patience, love, support and encouragement when it was most required. I hope I make you proud.

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# 1. Introduction

*'In the world of public affairs, the most valuable thing someone can give to you today, other than a financial contribution, is their email address.'*

**Brad Fitch**

---

**T**he idea that technology has revolutionised human communication is not new. The history of new communication technologies (NCTs) began with the telegraph which “moved to linear, non-interactive technologies (such as radio and television), and has moved on to interactive technologies (such as multimedia and the Internet)” (Marlow, 1996, p. 27).

The introduction of the telegraph forced theories of information-access to be forever changed; information could now be transmitted unrestrained from physical boundaries. Marlow (1996, p. 28) suggests “the meaning of electronic media is that it is part of the inexorable march towards the externalisation and extension of our senses on a global scale.” Communication is now less constrained by space and time, allowing mankind to interact at greater distances in shorter time spans. All communication technologies which achieve this are “intricately rooted – or wired – in technologies that came before [them]” (Hudson, 1997, p. 14). It is ironic that the Internet, a tool designed for defense can now be used as a tool for peace. Fundamentally, the primary function of the Internet is to transmit communication, similar to its predecessor the telegraph which pioneered the development of electronic media. As Carey (1988, p. 203) points out:

The telegraph was a watershed in communication. (It) can stand metaphorically for all innovations that ushered in the modern phase of history (because it) permitted for the first time the effective separation of communication from transportation.

The telegraph and NCTs work on the principle of transmitting encoded information through wires, and each have had a dramatic impact on human communication (Hudson, 1997). Technology constantly changes and advances yet the basis of all new communication technologies will always be human interaction. Technologies like the Internet have introduced profound social changes because they alter the way in which people communicate, and who they communicate to. At present, an estimated 14.18 million Australians make up a world wide estimate of 1.08 billion Internet users (Computer Industry Almanac, 2006, Global Online Populations section) and this number is rapidly increasing.

The ability for NCTs to “eliminate space in the communication process will create a new global sense of communication that is reminiscent of older oral traditions because people will become more dependent on and involved with each other” (Barnes, 2003, p. 327). Moreover, social change is affected by the elimination of space constraints, and due to society’s reliance on NCTs, it is now difficult to imagine living without them. “Over the past thirty years ... [the Internet alone] has changed the way people work, learn, play, and communicate” (Barnes, 2003, p. 3). This is because all new communication technologies transcend political, geographic and physical boundaries, so it is perhaps unsurprising that activist groups have employed the Internet to a high degree, enabling them to mobilise and act at considerable speed.

The Internet has enabled activists to combat traditional linear and hierarchical information flows through the provision of a network-based, peer-to-peer communication model. Without the Internet, planning and organising can

become demanding, costly, and difficult for activists. Before the Internet, organising an effort required activists to follow a fairly well-prescribed sequence of activities that began with an individual or small core group handing out leaflets on street corners. Their traditional communication methods relied heavily, if not solely, on the direct interaction of physically present people. However, this direct interaction has always been complemented by assorted media such as leaflets, brochures and newsletters to reach large numbers of people, both within and outside the groups, for at least two hundred years (Holtz, 2002; van de Donk, Loader, Nixon & Rucht, 2004). The unique factor which separates the use of the Internet from previous forms of internal and external activist communication is its ability to revolutionise - a contribution that van de Donk, et al. (2004, p. 1) argues for: "telephones, photocopiers and fax machines ... certainly do not." This shows that "the most revolutionary development in technology is now represented by the exponential growth in our abilities to communicate" (Mercer, 1998, p. 71).

Traditionally speaking, dominant public relations (PR) literature associates the field with the activities of large corporations and governments. It also commonly refers to activists as the enemy, arguing that "dealing with activists can be one of the most difficult areas of public relations practice because activist networks operate quite differently from other structures in society" (Harrison, 2006, p. 443). Moreover, many activists appear to view corporations as capitalist structures with simplistic exploitative relationships to their publics. This way of thinking might hold true if corporate and government sectors use the traditional *press agency* model of public relations defined by Grunig. However, many practitioners in these sectors have shifted towards open, honest and ethical communication because it is vital that they create and maintain mutually beneficial relations with customers, employees, suppliers and stakeholders for their survival in the twenty-first century.

MODELS	PRESS AGENCY	PUBLIC INFORMATION	TWO-WAY ASYMMETRIC	TWO-WAY SYMMETRIC
Purpose	Propaganda	Dissemination of information	Scientific persuasion	Mutual understanding
Nature of communication	One-way, truth not essential	One-way, truth important	Two-way imbalanced	Two-way balanced
Research	Little, press clippings only usually	Little – readability tests possibly, readership surveys	Feedback Formative research Evaluation of attitudes	Formative research Evaluation of understanding

*Figure 1.1. James Grunig's Four Models of Public Relations (1984).*

The Public Relations Institute of Australia defines public relations as “the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics” (Tymson & Lazar, 2002, p. 21). This definition is significant because the term ‘organisation’ is relevant for *all* sectors, and is not limited to only ‘company’ or ‘business’. How activists can also be included in this definition will become evident later in this thesis.

Separate from the interests of the state and corporate world, activism operates largely with voluntary labour and a nonprofit agenda for the ‘common good’ (Demetrious, 2004). In the past, activism has contributed to a fairer and democratic society, leading to new laws and views of society; for example, feminist and anti-racist issues. However, activism is often seen as civic dysfunctionality by the state and corporate world. Activism is not in itself inherently good or bad; it is a tool to achieve a goal, yet the dominant PR worldview considers activism to be a threat that must be removed (Demetrious, 2004).

Activism is historically a problematic area for the public relations industry and public relations has been known to be problematic for activists. "Interestingly, when activists discuss 'public relations', it is often only to portray themselves as *victims* of the public relations industry. When public relations discusses 'activism' it is often only as a *challenge* to organisations" (Demetrious, 2004, p. 432). Today, the use of advanced public relations techniques is not limited to governments or the corporate world: all organisations, including activist groups "can exercise influence through effective communication campaigns and the use of public relations strategies" (Demetrious, 2004, p. 432).

It is important to understand the relationship between activists and the corporate/government sectors, particularly to the degree to which activists have been able to utilise public relations, an area more commonly associated with corporate and government organisations. In turn, these traditional organisations have to recognise, accept, and create relationships with activists instead of treating them as the enemy (Demetrious, 2004, p. 429).

Ewen (1996) discusses the idea of the PR industry as a mechanism for control in society. He argues that the convergence of democracy and the rise of the media has resulted in public relations as a new controlling force in society. Demetrious believes this may explain why activists associate public relations with the corporate world and the 'domination' of workers:

Activists who mount campaigns often view corporations as capitalist structures with simplistic exploitative relationships to communities. Hostility erupts and each party reacts with predictable communication tactics and strategies. Much collective community action is reactive, time- and resource-poor and cobbled together under intense pressure. (Demetrious, 2004, p. 433)

Furthermore, corporations have been known to use anti-activism tactics. These have resulted in further distrust of public relations and a perception that businesses only know how to respond to activism through 'dirty tricks'. Public relations practitioners in business and government need to be aware of these hostile attitudes and the history that has created them. An understanding of the past will enable PR practitioners to improve their response to activism in the future.

Moreover, knowledge, understanding, and management of the public relations process are essential to the success of activists' efforts. The case-studies included in this project reveal that a lack of PR-knowledge limits the effectiveness of activist groups. For the context of this research, effectiveness can be determined by the response of the target, via the extent of mainstream coverage, or by the empowerment experienced by those taking part (Pickerill, 2003).

It is ironic that public relations specialists limit their effectiveness by "struggling to recognise the impact that the Internet will have on how communication occurs" (IMT Strategies, 2000, p. 1) because the introduction of online networks has significantly changed all communication environments. Compared to other industries like advertising and marketing, "public relations professionals have been relatively slow to use the Internet to advance their own messages and those of their clients" (Seitel, 1998, p. 225). However, activism eagerly incorporates the Internet into its repertoire, to the point that it has become a pre-requisite for communication in some groups.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the investigation of Internet use in activism and is based on an analysis of three case-study groups. More specifically, it seeks to critically explore and assess the implications of Internet use for mobilisation, communication and strategy of the activist groups: Information for Action (IFA); Stop the Toad Foundation (STTF); and Yarragadee Community Action (YCA).

Contemporary forms of activism seem to integrate traditional methods of communication, such as flyers and banners, with more technologically sophisticated tools of communication. The three case studies offer an insight into the use of new communication technologies such as the Internet, and reveals how NCTs enhance computer-mediated communication (CMC). Through investigating the Internet communication and strategies of activist groups, this research seeks to contribute to an alternative research agenda in the fields of public relations and activism.

Cyberactivism is a relatively recent phenomenon and because new communication technologies like the Internet have rapidly changed within the past two decades, there is not a solid theoretical framework. While some research has been conducted in the field, the steady development and implementation of NCTs constantly challenges the research agenda. There are several approaches that can be taken to researching CMC use: in-depth interviews; the observation of technology use; and participation through online interaction (Kendall, 1999). Observing online interaction through e-mail discussion lists; attempting to reach the online audience of websites; general interaction with online activities; and regular observations of websites are essential to understand CMC use (Mittra & Cohen, 1999). However, Pickerill (2003) argues that all factors affecting CMC can be examined adequately only through in depth-interviews or observation of the actual interface between activists and their computers. This research follows a case-study approach as it enables consideration of all the factors that influence people's involvement with cyberactivism:

Case-studies are multi-perspectival analyses. This means that the researcher considers not just the voice and perspective of the actors, but also of the relevant groups of actors and the interaction between them. This one aspect is a salient point in the characteristic that case studies possess. They give a voice to the powerless and voiceless. (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991)

In-depth interviews were conducted with participants involved in the strategic development of activities of groups included in the research, complemented with interviews with activists whose roles were more supportive than strategic.

## **1.1 Research Methodology**

The primary focus of this research was to investigate the practice of cyberactivism through a case-study approach. Through primary and secondary research, this thesis aims to explore the application of cyberactivism within activist organisations.

The methodology for this research was a series of in-depth interviews with members and staff from Perth activist organisations. The methodology was designed to address the aims of the research, which were to:

- Collate current literature into a framework that addresses activism and its connection to public relations;
- Create a picture of the state of cyberactivism and its use by activist organisations; and
- Collect data from local activists and activist organisations to compare and contrast current, local practice with the theory.

All interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Interviews were complemented with e-mail interviews with activists experienced in more traditional forms of tactics. Both in-depth and e-mail interviews were conducted over a period of three months between July and September 2006. A total of seven interviewees contributed to this research after considerable difficulty trying to locate willing participants. One of the original case-study groups had to be replaced due to their lack of willingness to assist with this research.



Activists' reluctance to participate is explained in chapter four. Activists saw their participation in this research as a reciprocal opportunity that allowed them to negotiate, not so much what they could do for me, but what I could do for them. Just before an interview with the Stop the Toad Foundation participant, I was asked if I would be willing to distribute some campaign posters and flyers around my university. I obliged, as it was a small request in comparison to what I was required to do for an interview with the Information for Action group. To get a one hour interview, I had to work a full day at the organisation (a spare room in a house), updating their lobbying database:

**From:** Information for Action [ifa@information.org]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, August 30, 2006 10:52 PM  
**To:** 'Shane Newton'  
**Subject:** RE: Cyberactivism Research

Hi Shane,

I am happy to do an interview if you will be a volunteer with IFA for one day i.e. 10 – 5 pm any day of the week Monday to Friday.

Then you will get to meet some of the other volunteers, experience cyber-activism and help the environment,

Cheers,

Information for Action  
PO Box 245  
North Perth  
WA 6906  
Australia  
[www.information.org](http://www.information.org)

After the interview with the IFA member I was asked to update the databases and was given a large amount of paperwork which needed to be typed up. Unfortunately I had to end my volunteering early as an issue sprang up that needed my attention elsewhere.

As a result of my early departure, I received another e-mail from Information for Action who were disappointed I did not complete a full day of volunteering:

**From:** Information for Action [ifa@information.org]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, September 12, 2006 11:38 PM  
**To:** 'Shane Newton'  
**Subject:** RE: Cyberactivism Research

Hi Shane,

It was unfortunate that you had to leave early today. I reserved a PC for you.

I hope you will honour our agreement and come in one day next week.

Pity you missed meeting my afternoon shift of volunteers including a programmer. And I was going to show you some videos and show props.

Cheers,

Information for Action  
PO Box 245  
North Perth  
WA 6906  
Australia  
[www.information.org](http://www.information.org)

*Figure 1.1.2 Final response from Information for Action.*

Time constraints have prevented me from fulfilling Information for Action's request to make up for the lost volunteering time.

All my initial assumptions and expectations about this study changed rapidly as my research progressed. 'Textbook' examples of cyberactivism were rare, near impossible, to find. The nature of activism means a constant struggle for time and resources, which impacts upon the level of effectiveness an organisation can achieve. The case-studies examined in this research fell short of the idealistic activist examples featured in the literature - this reasons why will be examined later in this thesis.

The use of NCTs by cyberactivist organisations is difficult to study because of their very nature; they tend to be elusive phenomena, often with no clear boundaries. Groups may have fragmented organisational structures, expand or shrink in a short time frame, change tactics, strategy and goals at any given moment. In sum, cyberactivist groups are 'moving targets', difficult to observe (van de Donk, et al. 2004).

This research will not bring definitive answers, the modest ambition being to explore empirically the use of the Internet by cyberactivists in order to find similarities and differences, from which new and more precise hypotheses can be derived about the possible effect the Internet has on cyberactivist communication.

## **1.2 About the Chapters**

The exploration of cyberactivism in relation to public relations will be addressed in five chapters. The first chapter introduces the research topic; chapter two explores theoretical perspectives on public relations and activism; chapter three provides a background to the Internet and cyberactivism; chapter four explores the modes of cyberactivist communication; and the final chapter examines the overall findings of the research, followed by the conclusion.

# **2. Chapter Two: Theorising Activism - A Public Relations Approach**

---

## **2.1 Introduction**

**T**he public relations industry has endured a long battle to attain credibility as a reputable profession, constantly challenged and questioned by a paradigm struggle “that has erupted between the (dominant) instrumental and the critical fields of research” (Baillie, 2002, p. ii). A dominant organisational and corporate focus on PR research and education has created a narrow-minded approach to what public relations *actually* is and who uses it. This is further exacerbated in the media portrayal of the industry, fuelling a misperception of PR as a manipulator of public opinion for the benefit of corporate and state interests (Baillie, 2002).

The dominant organisational-focused model has also been criticised for its lack of understanding of the social role of public relations. However, activist organisations, (whose strategies appear to be ‘public relations’) have long been considered representative of social causes, public interests and needs (Baillie, 2002). Thus activist organisations are important for public relations research because they provide an alternative voice to the main perception of PR as a corporate tool.

While the corporate world can benefit from studying activist organisations, activist organisations can also benefit from studying the activities of the corporate world: the challenge is that both regard each other as 'the enemy'. Mainstream public relations research suggests that activist groups constrain the effectiveness of organisations, and teach public relations professionals reactive approaches to combat the hostile tactics of activist groups.

It appears that some activist organisations do not consider their efforts as public relations, firstly because they perceive PR as a tool exclusively used by businesses and governments; and secondly, many activists do not understand what they do is considered public relations because they have no education or background in the field. This could be a barrier for activist groups to create effective public relations objectives, strategies and evaluation methods.

Prominent scholars have found the overwhelming attention given to commercial and state interests in PR theory is problematic because it ignores the interests and needs of other fields that use public relations. There is a trend within the PR research community that calls for the role and core values of the profession to be reevaluated, encouraging the development of a theoretical framework that distinguishes the profession from its dubious past. Two-way asymmetric and symmetric approaches to PR which value ethics and mutual understanding are favoured over the traditional public relations models of press agency and public information, which ignore the facilitation of relationships and focus on information dissemination - disregarding accuracy or truthfulness.

Traditionally speaking, public relations has been theorised from an organisational perspective, resulting in its development as an instrument of state and commerce (Baillie, 2002). Most public relations literature focuses on the technical side of the profession, providing manuals and 'how-to-do-it' guides for overcoming the

obstacles PR practitioners face. Subsequently, this has marginalised the academic field with little discussion of the profession's non-instrumental functions. Many publics perceive the industry as responsible for the maintenance of corporate reputation and capital by any means necessary through one-way communication strategies. This position is further reinforced throughout, and by, the mass media. A constant coverage of unethical and questionable PR activities reveals a need for attention to the social aspects of the profession, not just the economic factors:

Public relations scholars are now looking beyond the commercial and state foundation the profession has built itself upon, and are looking to the periphery, to activism and activist groups, as a guide to the future direction and understanding of the profession. (Baillie, 2002, p. iii)

Activist groups have often brought together people with similar interests to particular issues - to uphold and express opinions relating to social causes. Emerging from this thesis is the proposition that public relations is a function of activism – they are not separate entities. This integration of activities into one ideological framework creates an alternative response to dominant literature in the field of public relations research. Research that challenges mainstream perspectives on the role of activism will provide a contemporary voice and offer “a better understanding of the significance of the social role of the public relations practitioner” (Baillie, 2002, p. 8).

The concepts of activism, cyberactivism and public relations will be addressed in this chapter and I will explore the interrelationships between them. This will contribute to understanding the ongoing hostility between activism and PR.

To contextualise the theoretical framework of this thesis, I will first introduce the case studies and their participants before exploring the key theoretical



perspectives of public relations and activism. It is interesting to note that all interviewees' involvement with activism predates mainstream use of the Internet in campaigns. A brief outline of their online operations also helps to understand their use of cyberactivism, discussed in later chapters.

### 2.1.1 Stop the Toad Foundation



The Stop the Toad Foundation is a not-for-profit, non-government organisation incorporated in Western Australia in October 2005. The Foundation's main purpose is to prevent cane toads from invading Western Australia. It undertakes on-ground cane toad control work and seeks to support the independent activity of other concerned groups working to mutually agreed strategic purposes, operations and procedures. It tries to ensure that all efforts against cane toads are cooperative, integrated, strategic, cost-effective and safe for participants.

The strategic focus of the Foundation is to alert all Western Australians to the potential impacts of the cane toad and engage everybody in the fight to protect Western Australia from the toad's imminent invasion.

### 2.1.2 Information for Action



Information for Action is a non profit environmental organisation committed to environmental change in the global community. Work on the website began in 1999 and is maintained by volunteers.

The mission of Information for Action is to: minimise the harmful effects of people on ecosystems by generating greater awareness and commitment to environmental change in the global community and by publishing, communicating and disseminating ideas and information on the state of the earth's environment through websites, e-mails, newsletters, meetings, seminars and conferences. IFA encourages, promotes, and facilitates direct and indirect action by providing resources and information from its database.

### 2.1.3 Yarragadee Community Action



The Yarragadee Community Action site was established as a portal for information on Water Corporation's proposal to abstract forty-five gigalitres of water annually from the South West Yarragadee aquifer for West Australia's water supply. Some of the content on the site is oppositional, including scientific research that challenges the viewpoints of the proponent Water Corporation, and also the regulator Department of Water. It is also a central point for web-based news articles from various media sources.

The site is overseen by staff at the Conservation Council of WA (CCWA) which is a peak body of more than eighty local and regionally based environment groups. YCA uses a grass-roots structure with no central coordination or spokesperson and is made up of disparate groupings in time and space. Part of the rationale for establishing the website was to provide a forum for various members of the community of Western Australia to express opinions about Yarragadee, without the requirement for formal groupings, structures or motivations.



### **2.1.4 Complementary Participants**

I interviewed four cyberactivists with experience pre-dating mainstream Internet use, first contacting them by e-mail and inviting them to participate in the research project. Interviewees had demonstrated activism in areas of politics, the environment, gender/sexuality and feminism. I interviewed all four over e-mail (because of geographic location and participant preference) but was able to eventually meet and conduct an in-depth interview with one of them.

## **2.2 Theoretical Perspectives of Public Relations**

Mainstream perspectives on public relations are bound to the metanarratives that support commercial and state interests (Baillie, 2002). As a result of the industry grounded in capitalist ideology, the rise of alternative approaches to the profession has been of little interest or foreseeable value to the corporate world.

Dozier and Lauzen (2000) suggest the failure to research alternatives to mainstream perspectives has spawned an intellectual myopia defined as the “limited understanding of the profession dominated by invisible clients” (cited in Baillie, 2002, p. 8). Dozier and Lauzen argue this intellectual myopia has been most evident in public relations research concerning activism.

It would be misguided to assume the word ‘public’ implies affecting all people, as traditionally speaking the term ‘public relations’ is associated with the interests of business and state (Demetrious, 2006). Mainstream public relations literature (Harrison, 2006; Wilcox, Ault, Agee & Cameron, 2000; Hendrix, 2001; Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000) provides only limited and sometimes problematic attention to activists’ use of public relations. Demetrious (2006) suggests that to

understand why, it is necessary to examine the underlying factors that shape views of public relations, found in statements like the following:

Public relations practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which serve both the organisation's and the public interest. (World Assembly of Public Relations in Mexico City, 1978)

This definition separates the *organisation* and the *public* into two domains although it does not automatically assume conflict. It does explain that social analysis and strategic activity can serve *both* the organisation and the public interest, a view aligned with the notion of pluralism (Demetrious, 2006). Pluralism largely developed in the United States and is both a political philosophy and ideology that asserts power is distributed and exercised between several participants or groups (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1984, p. 314). While pluralists do not regard all groups as equal, they consider that power is generally dispersed and available in various forms that allows influence to be possessed in democratic societies (Smith, 1993).

Pluralists also stress the need for 'countervailing powers' which constrain certain groups to the point where they cannot gain too much power and influence (Smith, 1993). This constraint is usually in the form of an alternative counter group, for example, in the case of the nuclear energy issue the development of a pro-nuclear lobby led to the creation of the anti-nuclear lobby. "Even if the countervailing groups do not emerge, powerful groups are also externally checked by the existence of potential groups" (Demetrious, 2006, p. 100). This insight into how pluralists view the world shows why they are not concerned about the asymmetry of power between groups and why they do not seek to represent all. This may explain why PR has traditionally been focused around the activities of large state and business organisations (Demetrious, 2006, p. 101).

For a pluralist, an activist group counterweights a corporation's relative power. Beyond this the state acts as society's safety net so that "the very system of government provides for the representation of a plurality of interests" (Smith, 1993, p. 17). "Therefore, it could be assumed from a pluralist view that the activist groups may have other relationships that also wield power" (Demetrious, 2006, p. 101).

Pluralism does have its critics, with Smith (1993) pointing out its failure to recognise that organisations are in an advantageous position from their access to resources and information. Smith calls this an oversimplification that reflects "insufficient attention to the structural and ideological context and the interests and activities of bureaucracy and the government" (1993, p. 25).

Ryan (1991) contributes further on pluralism, activism and public communications, maintaining that under the pluralist model it is recognised that power is shared unequally, but that this power asymmetry is not a problem pluralists recognise in the overall agency to create change. "Indeed, if it is assumed that much of the public relations *not described* is embedded in activism, for example, anti-corporate or environmental campaigns, then it is also often as business managing the process of activism as a negative element in achievement of corporate objectives (Demetrious, 2006, p. 101).

Public relations operates and is described from a largely pluralist perspective in dominant discourse. Key public relations texts, including Wilcox, Ault, Agee and Cameron (2000), Hendrix (2001), and Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000), demonstrate the extent to which this view of society as pluralistic is entrenched in public relations discourse and literature (Demetrious, 2006). Further evidence of PR and its association with pluralism can be found in Grunig and Hunt's (1984) conceptual frameworks of PR models: publicity/press agency; public information; two-way asymmetric; and two-way symmetric. Grunig's two-

way symmetric model of public relations can be criticised as simplistic as it assumes that power is shared equally in society and that 'symmetry' between organisations and public is achievable (Demetrious, 2006, p. 101). For example, if the federal government invites public feedback on a prospective policy – it is considered two-way communication, but the public giving the feedback do not have the same power in controlling the outcome that the government does. It makes citizens feel part of a democratic process when really it is just a front.

Many public relations researchers have scrutinised the function of activism, presenting activists only as threats to organisations. Harrison contributes to a division of activism and public relations by suggesting that activism only reflects a "lack of faith in society's decision-making structures and lack of access to formal communication channels with decision-makers" (Harrison, 2006, p. 443). He continues to argue that protest as a strategy is used by the weak and that activists seek only confrontation, so the traditional public relations response of creating compromise, respect, trust and goodwill is totally inadequate (2006, p. 449). This contradicts all three activist case-study groups researched, who all preferred to work *with* governments and organisations, rather than *against* them. However, all interviewees discovered that sometimes the organisations and government bodies relevant to their causes were hardly accountable or transparent.

It is unreasonable for Harrison to suggest that *only* activists execute unethical PR strategies, when governments and businesses have been exposed for executing the very same tactics: "they have no hesitation in exaggerating and telling lies to the public through the mass media. They employ sweeping generalisations, the presentation of false choices, selective use of data, and outright errors of fact in their cause" (Harrison, 2006, p. 443). While this sounds more like the PR model of press-agentry, it does not reflect the efforts of activists' examined in this research. Activists' tactics impact local, regional and global communities, so, like any other

sector in society – including business and government – these activities are subject to scrutiny and need to be viewed through an ethical framework (Demetrious, 2004).

Ultimately, the PR efforts of activists groups and the corporate world should not be considered separate; both use public relations to establish and maintain mutual understanding between their organisations and their publics. To deny activists strategies as legitimate PR efforts would further reinforce a narrow-focused approach to the profession.

Grunig and Hunt's (1984) references to activism have developed a framework for subsequent research including Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000) and Wilcox, Ault, Agee, and Cameron (2000). In their work, Grunig and Hunt define public relations as "the management of communication between an organisation and its publics" (1984, p. 6). Although this definition has the potential to include activism, Grunig and Hunt only refer to activists as a *challenge* to organisations.

This is also the case for Larissa Grunig who defines an activist public as "a group of two or more individuals who organise in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics, or force" (1992, p. 504). Although her definition is satisfactory, Larissa's research maintains a view of activism from a corporate management perspective, suggesting activism limits organisational effectiveness. She attempts "to help practitioners deal in more than an ad hoc way with the opposition their organisations face from activist groups" (1992, p. 503). This suggests that organisations like activist groups are excluded from mainstream paradigms, resulting in them being examined from an internal perspective of the dominant framework. Grunig again reinforces this idea that activist groups are separate entities. It is rare to find prominent PR scholars who consider activist groups as organisations, or that they can work *with* other organisations.

### 2.2.1 A Situational Theory to Identify Publics

Grunig and Hunt's theorising on publics can be applied to activist and cyberactivist groups because it identifies the variants of publics' actions. Partly drawing on Blumer and Dewey's work on publics, Grunig and Hunt agreed that publics can be segmented. Factors that facilitate which public an individual can be segmented into resides in "the extent to which they passively or actively communicate about an issue and the extent to which they behave in a way that supports or constrains the organisation's pursuit of its mission" (Grunig & Repper, 1992, p. 125).

To assist public relations practitioners in identifying and classifying the publics of an organisation, James Grunig developed his situational theory of publics. The theory explains "when and how people communicate and when communications aimed at people are most likely to be effective" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 148). The three variables in the theory identify that publics are most likely to be active:

1. When they believe an organisation's decision(s) may produce problems (*problem recognition*). Members of Stop the Toad Foundation would have joined because they felt something needed to be done about the invasion of cane toads in Western Australia.
2. When they feel the problems are surmountable (*constraint recognition*). The inevitability of a cane toad invasion may prevent some members of the community from wanting to take action. They might perceive their efforts to be futile, so decide not to bother taking action.
3. When they feel included (*level of involvement*). This helps to identify if an individual's communication behavior will be active or passive. Stop the

Toad Foundation believed the reason why Perth citizens were not interested in the campaign was because the problem is not directly affecting the city yet. Members in the regional parts of Western Australia were more likely to seek information because in the event of an invasion they would be affected first.

Telg (2000) identified that most individuals join activist groups “as a means of getting information about (and taking action on topics they have a real interest in)” (Literature Review section, para. 6). The Internet can create publics who have the opportunity to be more active than ever before, an advantage for activist groups. For example, the Stop the Toad Foundation can invoke a sense of involvement and awareness of issues via regular computer-mediated communication with its members (for example, e-mail, bulletin boards, or on their website). As a result, these conditions help instill a sense of group effort and the idea that constraints can be overcome.

### 2.2.2 Size of Publics

One other characteristic of a public is its size which is interesting and paradoxical because it does not always reflect effectiveness or efficiency. Olson (cited in L. Grunig, 1992, p. 508) argued that small groups have certain advantages over larger groups. Although he refrained from citing numbers that differentiate ‘small’ from ‘large,’ he did argue that smaller groups tend to perform more efficiently than larger groups. The reason why Olson suggests smaller groups outperform larger ones is because “the more individuals in the group, the more serious the suboptimality” (Cited in L. Grunig, 1992, p. 509). Olson appears to imply that the reaction rate of smaller groups is faster than larger groups because they are unrestricted by the bureaucracies and procedures larger groups face. The case-study groups researched found efficiency and effectiveness to be challenging

due to a lack of available resources. They believed this problem would not be of concern for larger groups like GreenPeace because size automatically equals freedom and financial success. However, larger organisations have a stronger responsibility to ensure performance is maintained because more is at stake.

Olson also argues members of large groups have no incentive to become active, because they feel that their efforts have little impact on securing benefits from organisations. They often feel that the results will turn out the same, regardless of their contributions, and each member thinks other members will do the work. Olson's arguments are not supported by James Grunig, whose Sierra Club study found members "do not join for selective or solidary incentives [and] ... no members of an apathetic public could be found in the Sierra Club" (1989, p. 22). It is a possibility that publics have different reasons for joining groups which may be not directly related to the core activities. For example, it may be in vogue for a certain age group to be associated with a particular cause, like Amnesty International. The cause of the organisation is not the central reason, but the perceived benefit of participating is.

Olson also stated that "although people may join very small groups voluntarily, large-group membership depends on either rewards or sanctions" (cited in L. Grunig, 1992, p. 509). Regardless of size, activist groups never have *involuntary* members. J. Grunig (1989) also discredits Olson's theories on size as his Sierra Club findings discovered "some joined out of their desire to 'delegate activism' – affecting policy even though they themselves do not benefit" (L. Grunig, 1992, p. 509). Identifying the motivation for publics supporting activist groups is beyond the scope of this project but is a possible area of future investigation.



### 2.2.3 Activists' Perceptions of their Publics

It was interesting to see how the representatives of the activist groups perceived their members. They believed they knew their members very well and were more than eager to speak about, and on behalf of, their participants. Some groups typecast their older members as uneager to adopt CMC tools, preferring to stick to traditional methods, while others cited examples of members in their seventies who were keen to embrace the Internet. The Stop the Toad Foundation's justification for *not* creating a fully-fledged interactive site was based on the assumption that members would not use it:

I'm a bit of an old-school activist. I'm one to get out there and talk to people and get them to do stuff, opposed to using the Internet, and I think that other activists don't do it as well. I think also this type of campaign doesn't necessarily attract the people that are that type of activist [referring to cyberactivists]. It tends to attract the older type of activist who prefers going to meetings in offices. (Participant G, September 6, 2006)

The interviewee appears to assume that because they prefer to participate in more physical forms of activism, then all other members do as well. There is no evidence to support this claim, and it could be an issue for the organisation's strategy. If members do indeed prefer forms of online activism and the strategies are all physical-based, the response to these activities will be limited. This finding contradicts interviewee A's comment who said "most of the people I still see from 'back in the day' are more active now, or use the Internet for activism a lot." (September 11, 2006).

Participant C did not believe activists were more inclined to participate in online action than offline, but noted some exceptions:

There are a few elderly people I know who are predominantly online activists because getting to demonstrations is a drama, and some activists rely heavily on the Internet to project a larger, more impressive presence than their actual resources would justify. But a million people on the streets is a lot more impressive than a list of a million e-mail addresses and I don't think that's going to change anytime soon. (August 23, 2006)

Participant B believed that "the numbers of people who continue to attend rallies and protests suggests other activists are not necessarily inclined to only participate online" (August 24, 2006). The case-study groups were unable to provide factual evidence to support their statements about their members. Contradictions in some of the findings reveal a need to implement evaluative methods to discover how members really feel about CMC. For example, if members want to embrace cyberactivism but do not know where to begin, an objective for groups could be to start CMC workshops for their participants.

## **2.2.4 Activists and Misconceptions about Public Relations**

Activists have a limited idea, if any at all, of how the public relations apparatus works resulting in some not realising what they do is 'PR'. For example, when I informed an interviewee that I worked in public relations, I was told they could use someone like me to help them make more money. The participant did not understand that sales objectives were not the focus of public relations.

The lack of education about PR also contributes to the idea that it is only used by the corporate world. One interviewee argued that activists cannot practice public relations because it is used only for the profit and performance of the corporate world. Participant B did not consider public relations to be a function of activism, but suggested someone with a keen sense of public relations is going to be better able to plan and execute actions than someone with no sense of PR strategy.

Information for Action in particular had a skewed idea of what PR was and what it could bring, focusing wholly on the idea that it is used as a means for making money: "I'm trying to get people to sponsor my website but you can't just hit people for money. They have to either know you or warm to you so I'm, cultivating in an artificial way, a network because I want people's money" (Participant F, September 12, 2006). The IFA interviewee believed that using PR to make money this way would relieve the futility of alternative options for financial stability:

I don't like the business side. I don't want to get bogged down with becoming a businessman. I still want to be an activist and I'm constantly being pulled off for bureaucratic form filling, grants applications and stuff like that and it's a real distraction. (Participant F, September 12, 2006)

It would benefit activists greatly if they complemented their tactics with approaches they believe corporate public relations practise. There is a definite need for activists to take responsibility for the business side of their organisations if they expect grants and funding. Organisations that can show accountability for their actions and finances are more likely to receive grants and funding from government and corporate sectors.

Understanding the importance of two-way communication may also help activist groups achieve their objectives. "I'm just bouncing the information back – no more than that. I don't want to get into discussion. It's not about community, though there is that side, but I'm not interested in that. I like to put my message out and that's it" (Participant F, September 12, 2006). Clearly this is an example of the public information model of PR. It may be challenging for Information for Action to gain support and funding from publics when it is not interested in communicating with them.

## 2.3 Theoretical Perspectives of Activism

The previous section focused on how the corporate world traditionally used public relations as a weapon against activists. This section is devoted to how activists have traditionally viewed public relations.

Activists who commence action often consider corporations as capitalist structures with self-gratifying, exploitative relationships to communities. Many activists fail to identify their public communication activities as public relations, often associating the practise with big business and subterfuge. Consequently, “hostility erupts and each party reacts in adversarial roles with predictable tactics and strategies” (Demetrious, 2006, p. 103). A Marxist perspective may offer an explanation as to why activists neglect the accomplishments of the public relations industry. They view public relations as associated only with the corporate world and the domination of workers, so the management of communication is given limited attention and description in activism literature (Demetrious, 2006, p. 103).

One activist’s perspective on public relations considers the industry as evasive, sneaky and opportunistic: “it’s a propaganda tool used to manipulate the masses to make them believe we live in a democratic society” (Participant A, September 11, 2006). Nelson (1989) provides an alternative, contemporary view of activism and public relations when she argues that “the mass media are responsible for public misinformation and the maintenance of corporate power elites, particularly in regard to social movements” (1989, p. 131). Nelson looked at how corporations viewed the mobilisation of environmental groups as perceived threats, and how they conceal the true nature of tactics to deflect criticism. John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton’s book *Toxic Sludge is Good For You!* (1995) builds upon a theme that PR

is unethical and manipulative: “they argued that public relations practitioners bow routinely to the self-interest of their employers. This leads to unscrupulous behaviour and deliberate harm to the reputation of the opposition” (Demetrious, 2006, p. 104).

While Stauber and Rampton discuss activism throughout their work, not once do they accept public relations as a legitimate function of social movements. They view activism on a superficial level as a victim of the public relations industry, which is one of many ideas discussed which are not supported by any theoretical grounding.

### **2.3.1 Reliance on Voluntary Labour**

Volunteers are a critical part of activist organisations, with many relying heavily on their volunteers for support. Most volunteers assist because of their interest in a specific issue or cause, and their levels of knowledge and ability vary significantly. The case-study groups all relied on unpaid volunteers for help and suggested that the quality of volunteers was mediocre because those who were highly skilled and trained chose to undertake paid work. IFA for example, said:

Very few of my volunteers have got fulltime jobs, quite the opposite. They're all either unemployable due to a disability or unemployed. That's the nature of volunteers. Or usually they're transitory. It's frustrating because the only consistency is me. A volunteer may come for three or four years but it can sometimes be three days. It's a lucky dip every day because you don't know if the next person who walks through your door is going to give you the skills you really want. (Participant F, September 12, 2006)

The Stop the Cane Toad Foundation found a different experience with their volunteers. Many volunteered around their fulltime jobs, going to demonstrations during lunch breaks and helping out on weekends. It is clear volunteers with

diverse backgrounds and levels of experience assist activist organisations, thus the quality of volunteers impacts on the effectiveness of the activist groups:

We've survived on volunteers for seven years and it's been satisfactory, but at the same time it's been disappointing because you get volunteers who promise you all sorts and then don't deliver, or they deliver and then they leave. You constantly have to appreciate what you've got. (Participant F, September 12, 2006)

The IFA interviewee suggested that because volunteers do not receive any direct benefit (for example, payment) for assisting, there is no obligation for them to stay. This is untrue in other cases, as feelings of unity and working for the 'common good' have significant rewards for individuals, and these feelings can be encouraged and nurtured by the organisation that relies on its volunteer base (Demetrious, 2004). Activist groups that understand the benefits to volunteers are able to develop and maintain a stable and long-term volunteer surplus. Demetrious (2004, p. 444-445) adds that activists create mutually beneficial relationships by providing;

- Skill building, training and education;
- Establishing networks with people with similar values and concerns;
- Transferable work experience and responsibilities;
- A variety of tasks to perform; and
- Hours and times that suit individuals.

Building a successful team should be the priority of all activist groups because it will create clear and positive relationship with volunteers and the broader organisation.

## 2.4 Theoretical Perspectives of Cyberactivism

Although an existing organisation that establishes a web front can be called a cyberactivist group, there also exist *virtual* cyberactivists who have no physical presence, like Information for Action. All of IFA's operations are conducted virtually, the only physical presence being the residence which houses the equipment used to maintain the group's online activities. Edwards (2004) says 'real' or 'physical' organisations function in a physical space, usually with clear boundaries between means and people that belong to the organisation or do not, and in which the activities, means and people are ordered within dimensions of time and space.

Virtual cyberactivists "function within a non-physical cyberspace; the boundaries between organisations, the dividing lines between resources and people that belong to the groups or not, are waning" (Edwards, 2004, p. 188). From the studies conducted by Rosenkrands (2004), it is possible to identify three strategic approaches cyberactivists use for their Internet activities. These are not mutually exclusive, with some groups overlapping the approaches:

1. *Information-oriented sites* provide information to the visitor so they can make informed decisions about the causes, and/or become convinced to agree with the sites stance on the issues at hand. Rosenkrands (2004, p. 72) suggests these sites serve as alternative independent media channels. Yarragadee Community Action site believes it provides an alternative voice to the views of the Water Corporation and Department of Water.
2. *Mobilisation-oriented sites* try to gain public support for a specific cause. These sites usually have a top-down structure, with little opportunity for

participants to give feedback. Information for Action is a classic example of a mobilisation-oriented site. A common element these sites provide are pre-fabricated letters for lobbying – the feature upon which IFA's framework was constructed. Although these sites lack a range of two-way communication options, they still offer more to the user compared with activities run through traditional channels.

3. *Community-oriented sites* strive to build strong relationships and shared purpose between visitors. Sites with high levels of interactivity usually reflect this model. The Bicycle Transportation Alliance (BTA) has an exemplary, community-oriented site. The group aims to promote cycling for both transport and recreation. Members are brought together through communicative functionalities resulting in both online and offline action, and participants are invited to contribute to content direction.

### 2.4.1 Awareness/Advocacy

Awareness and advocacy occur when an informed public accesses relevant information. This is difficult because traditional information channels may well be controlled by those whose interest is counter to that of the activists (Vegh, 2003, p. 72). The Internet overcomes this to serve as an alternative form of information and news source, and the information distribution networks serve as an important tool for organising and mobilising. The principal uses of the Internet in online advocacy concern organising the movement and executing action. The process of online advocacy can focus on organising and mobilising a group of people for action, or actually carrying out an effort with a particular goal in mind (Vegh, 2003, p. 73). These can be: a strictly defined organisation; a civic advocacy group; a lobbying body; or a loosely defined group. Moreover, successful online advocacy campaigns integrate different types of lobbying and mobilisation.



### 2.4.2 Organisation/Mobilisation

An online presence not only assists with informing members, but can also aid the process of transforming Internet-based activism to the physical world. The process of rallying participants for a call to action (be it protests or demonstrations) has always been a difficult and unpredictable element for most activist groups (Klandermans, 1984). Several methods have been used traditionally to ignite support, ranging from direct mail, mass media and formal organisations, to more informal networks of friends and relatives. It is clear that NCTs should be included, after their successful implementation in recent anti-globalisation protests (van Aelst & Walgrave, 2004).

From researching seventeen activist sites, van Aelst and Walgrave discovered how Internet sites act as 'action mobilisators'. Cyberactivists mobilised visitors in a number of ways including:

- (a) *Membership* – Gives visitors the opportunity to join or support the organisation. This is through online registration, forums, donating money or buying promotional goods.
- (b) *Calendars* – Notify users of any call-to-action protests/demonstrations and practical information such as transport and accommodation.
- (c) *Collaboration* – Seven of the sites van Aelst and Walgrave viewed gave *all* members the option to add their own protest activities.
- (d) *Post-event news* – Fifteen of the sites reported on the action after they occurred to document activities and for those unable to attend.

Two of the case-study groups had calendar-like options (STTF, YCA) yet only one provided an option for membership (IFA). None of the groups had collaboration options yet the nature of STTF and YCA's issues enabled them to have post-event news features. The sites van Aelst and Walgrave reviewed:

Were clearly a means of support in the mobilisation process for all sorts of 'real' protest actions, but were used far less as an action tool on their own. Barely half of the organisations used some form of online action, for the most part online petitions. (2004, p. 115)

There are three ways the Internet is used for mobilisation. First, it can be used to call for offline action: a distributed e-mail may call for a demonstration at a given place and time. Second, it can be used to call for an action that would traditionally occur offline, but can be just as effective online, such as updating members via e-mail. The efficiency lies in the cost-effectiveness of not having to print physical documents for all members, and the minimisation of physically distributing the information. Thirdly, the Internet can be used to call for online action that can only possibly be carried out online, such as a coordinated massive spamming campaign or ping-storm attack, which maliciously saturates a server with messages aimed to test communication between computers in an amount and frequency that overwhelm its response capacity and thus disrupts or halts the server of the target entity (Vegh, 2003, p. 74).

Although the Internet allows immediate global mobilisation and organisation, it can only facilitate traditional forms of protest such as rallies, demonstrations, and collection of signatures because they cannot be replaced. Virtual mobilisation may be devalued by activists themselves because it lacks attraction of the group experience and the 'fun' and 'adventure factor' accompanying some forms of protest (van de Donk, et al., 2004). It is important to understand that activism does more than facilitate traditional forms of

protest - it could be used to help change behaviour, for example, to boycott fast food chains, encourage people to cycle to work, or give up plastic bags.

### 2.4.3 Action/Reaction

The last category covers online attacks committed by 'hackers' which Vegh believes fall into three general categories: "cyberattack (isolated); cybercampaign (coordinated, part of an identified conflict); and cyberwar (sustained mutual engagement)" (2003, p. 82). This type of activism, also known as *hacktivism* works against organisations. Hacktivists argue that their actions advance human rights through electronic media, but the reality falls short of the ideology because it weakens any long-term relationships and possibilities of working *with* organisations whose policies/consequences they want to change. As previously noted, none of the case-study groups participated in forms of hacktivism, but all agreed it had its place.

### 2.4.4 A Diffuse Audience: Sustaining, Not Building Networks

Although cyberactivism strengthens the ties that bind participants together it seems unlikely to mobilise new participants for movements (Pickerill, 2003). Internet communication tends to be transmitted to a specific and intended audience. However, websites are able to reach a wide readership, as are discussion lists, which can be forwarded and diffused to multiple users. E-mails forwarded to multiple discussion lists can cause problems due to a lack of content moderation. Thus, mobilising via the Internet engages with a diffuse audience – an audience which may not be immediately sympathetic to the activists' causes (Pickerill, 2003).

Interviewees suggested it was difficult to attract individuals unaware or sympathetic to their causes only via the Internet because it is used mainly to

communicate to the 'already converted'. It would be difficult for an individual to discover their web presence unless he/she intentionally sought that information. An Internet user will only access a site like Stop the Toad Foundation if they intentionally seek it, or stumble upon it from a related-cause search. This is why a dependence on mainstream media channels is so fundamental to bring the issues to the attention of inactive viewers, and hopefully convert them to become active and involved in the campaigns. Total reliance on the Internet could possibly contribute to a narrowing, not a broadening, of the audiences that activists engage with (Pickerill, 2003).

#### 2.4.5 'Old School' versus 'New School' Activism

The terms 'activism' and 'cyberactivism' should not be locked in, or their distinctions be considered important for individuals to identify with. The terms are used merely to contrast the types of activism available and it is important to understand the process more than the category. When participants were asked if they considered themselves cyberactivists, most had not given it much thought, or did not know what it meant. If they did, their understanding was usually limited or incorrect. Others thought labels were unnecessary, or felt more comfortable calling themselves activists - unworthy of the title 'cyberactivist' because of their limited technical knowledge.

In 1993, after reading an article called 'Cyberpunk!' in *Time*, the IFA interviewee was convinced he was becoming a cyberactivist: "It just blew me away. I don't think I can think of a single article I've ever read in any magazine that influenced me so much. It was just wow, this is for me" (Participant F, September 12, 2006).

Some believed the term meant hacking or conducting illegal activities. YCA interviewee mentioned: "I'm getting a handle on Dreamweaver if that counts? I

don't know what a cyberactivist is. I'm not going to be sending viruses out or any illegal activities" (Participant E, September 14, 2006).

The STTF interviewee kept referring to herself as an 'old school' activist, so when posed with the question she replied: "Not as much as I am a more 'active' activist. I'd rather get out on the streets in a protest or demonstration, or hold up a banner or write a letter than sign e-petitions or go online to find out what to do" (Participant G, September 6, 2006). Her preference for offline methods derived from experience in previous campaigns which have always required physical activity (giving presentations, demonstrating on the streets, rallies and stalls) rather than online tactics.

It was expected that the IFA interviewee preferred Internet activism over physical forms, as the group's activities are wholly net-based. The interviewee mentioned that he hated going to meetings and was withdrawing from society because physical forms of activism were too much hard work:

I like the Internet because you can work at your own time, there's no pressure. I'm withdrawing from the real world and becoming more of a cyberactivist because of the frustration of having to deal with people. I don't like meetings because I don't get a lot out of them. The amount of information you get, I could get off the net in ten minutes instead of sitting there for three hours listening to some boring speaker going on and on about something he knows nothing about... it's stupid. The politics of dealing with people face-on is just ridiculous. People are just weird, including myself. Having to deal with people's egos all the time in real life has made me reclusive. (Participant F, September 12, 2006)

It appears that activists do not fully understand either activism or public relations.

It is evident that interviewees did not have a strong grasp of the concept of activism as none of them could define cyberactivism. It is unknown if this finding is widespread across all activist groups, or if it is case-study specific. This is a

possible area of future investigation as it is beyond the scope of this research.

#### 2.4.6 The Need for Change

Interviewees who admitted that their technical knowledge was limited felt they should improve their skills out of necessity, rather than desire. They were much more interested in ideas, rather than massaging the technology to get those ideas out, the only problem being that most interviewees found it almost impossible to receive professional training at a reasonable price.

The STTF interviewee suggested that she's becoming more familiar with online activism as a result of the Stop the Toad campaign having a strong Internet presence. The idea of cyberactivism is also appealing to activists because it can be cheaper, quicker and more pervasive when organising grass-roots events. Referring to basic online activist methods (e-mail, posting on discussion forums) the STTF interviewee said:

I don't know if it's because I'm not that familiar and not that good with computers and the Internet, but I definitely can do it and confident in doing it, but taking it to that next level is maybe not something I'm that comfortable doing, or not that skilled at doing, so I just tend to not to do it. (Participant G, September 6, 2006)

A strong awareness of a need to increase technical knowledge was apparent in all groups. The STTF interviewee admitted: "I am aware that maybe I do need to learn more. For now, though, I prefer to talk to people and get out there and be physically active, more so than on the net." (Participant G, September 6, 2006).

# **3. Chapter Three: Setting the Scene - Cyberactivism and the Internet**

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## **3.1 Introduction**

In June of 1999 in cities around the globe, a protest occurred which centred around a 'Carnival against Capitalism' (Pickerill, 2003). Mainstream media focused on images of riot police clashing with demonstrators, injured citizens and the carnage left behind. However, the Internet's role was also reported: "headlines from both the broadsheet and tabloid newspapers included: 'A Riot from Cyberspace;' 'Internet Message Sets off a Rampage;' and 'Virtual Chaos Baffles Police'" (Pickerill, 2003, p. 1). In contrast to previous forms of activism, the defining difference was the use of the Internet which enabled activists to promote, plan and implement action at considerably lower cost and higher speed.

Forms of activism conducted via the Internet are referred to as online activism or cyberactivism. The process is fairly straightforward: "Activists now take advantage of the technologies and techniques offered by the Internet to achieve their traditional goals" (Vegh, 2003, p. 71). The Internet is not one place or one company though. "It is a descriptive term for a web of thousands of interconnected broad and narrow-band telephone, satellite, and wireless networks built on existing and planned communication technology" (Gattiker, 2001, p. 3). Illia proposes the convergence of activism on the Internet has changed the "dynamics of activism into a new form of pressure that is the result of different dynamics of pressure on

corporations" (2002, p. 334). Cyberactivists use the Internet by following online dynamics, which in turn is used as an information and relationship medium. Cyberactivism "grows around issues selected through the interconnection of many kinds of players: traditional pressure groups that go online; spontaneous aggregation; and individuals." There are two distinct groups of cyberactivists and their strategies are either Internet-based or Internet-enhanced. Vegh (2003, p. 72) outlines these distinctions:

In the former case, the Internet is only used to enhance the traditional advocacy techniques, for example, as an additional communication channel, by raising awareness beyond the scope possible before the Internet, or by coordinating action more efficiently. In the latter case, the Internet is used for activities that are only possible online, like a virtual sit-in or hacking into target websites.

The case studies in this research present both Internet-enhanced and Internet-based forms of activism, with both falling into three general areas: awareness/advocacy; organisation/mobilisation; and action/reaction (Vegh, 2003, p. 72). It is necessary to discuss these three areas to emphasise the direction of initiative: who sends the information, or receives it; who calls for action or is called upon; and who initiates an action or reacts to one. These progressive steps can be linked to Grunig's situational theory of publics because it reveals online factors which determine if a user can be considered part of a latent, active or aware public.

Given that cyberactivism as a discipline is still a relatively new idea, it can only be assumed that "the Internet affects the *internal structure* of activist groups, above all the density and direction of their links" (van de Donk, et al. 2004, p. 19) It may also be that the Internet challenges to some extent, the "top-down flow of communication domination" (van de Donk, 2004, p. 19) because it aids in intensifying communication among all activists within a group, regardless of rank or file. The extent of the impact on the internal structure is not yet clear,



but it is suggested there is ample evidence that “the nature of the Internet is conducive, allowing alliances and coalitions to be forged both vertical and horizontal, across different activist parties” (van de Donk, et al., 2004, p. 19). The findings from this thesis support these statements, yet the degree to which groups implement this is case-specific, as will be discussed later.

The actual use of new communication technologies by cyberactivists has undergone limited investigation to date. From casual observations and remarks in the literature, it is evident that NCTs are generally making their way within activist groups and social movements, though at different speeds and varying degrees.

Little is known about the different ways the Internet assists with mobilising activists, but studies have found two fundamental functions of the Internet: “first, it helps communication in information dissemination, formal networking, and action coordination; second, it helps in building a collective identity among participants and potential participants” (Nip, 2004, p. 233).

Modest though it may appear to be in scope, cyberactivism “has been on the rise in many places over the past few years, in many cases building upon an already existing undergrowth of communication channels” (Wright, 2004, p. 81). Events in China surrounding the Tiananmen Square occupation in 1989 were arguably the first to showcase the role of the Internet in place-based activism. Computer-mediated communication enabled activists to bypass the Chinese government’s censors by using e-mail, and allowed them to get their information out to the world, and also receive the world’s reactions. The Tiananmen Square occupation single-handedly drew attention to the power of the Internet, which appeared to enable activist organisations to become more effective and more powerful than ever before.

Recent global activist campaigns indicate these activities are heavily, if not wholly, dependent on Internet communication methods. The demonstrations against the 1999 World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting, also known as the 'The Battle of Seattle,' became the tipping point in the evolution of activism because it pushed activism to a new level of political consciousness.

This chapter examines the Internet as a form of communication by looking at how the medium was used initially by activist groups and explores the impediments to the effectiveness of cyberactivism.

### 3.2 Defining the Internet

The Internet represents a radical shift from earlier communication technologies. It enables anyone with computer access to search information, post feedback, and, at low cost with little effort, to create websites themselves and so becoming content providers as individuals or as part of a group (Clarke, 2004).

Defining technological terms like the Internet is necessary because they can have contextual-based meanings. An understanding of the technical meaning of the Internet may prevent any misunderstanding later on, so in the framework of this research the term *Internet* will be used according to Holt's (2004, p. 3) definition:

The core of the Internet is a set of high-speed lines for communicating between primary nodes, or host computers, which in turn encompass thousands of smaller networks. The Internet was designed so that no single computer or network controls it. This means one or more nodes can malfunction without interrupting the Internet as a whole or causing it to shut down.

One idea that most scholars agree upon is that social contexts reconfigure how communication media are used. As Castells (2001, p. 50) suggests, "the Internet

is a particularly malleable technology, susceptible to being deeply modified by its social practice, and leading to a whole range of potential social outcomes." From the beginning the Internet has been about networking, "not just networks of wires and hubs, but networks of people" (Gurak & Logie, 2003, p. 25). The same applies to cyberactivist groups comprising individuals united as a virtual network, bound by a common concern or issue.

### 3.2.2 The Medium is the Message

Once an activist group establishes and identifies its publics, it needs to choose the best method for conveying its message. This message can be carried in a multitude of ways, yet the nature of the Internet makes it an ideal option for activist communication. This is because computer-mediated communication allows a level of interactivity that is unavailable in traditional forms of communications media, such as newspapers, radio and television broadcasts. The technology has also redefined the concept of the mass audience, allowing niche messages to be received by specific publics. "Electronic media have splintered the mass audience" (Marlow, 1996, p. 162). The technology allows a subdivision of publics to the point where activists are almost communicating one-on-one. Marshall McLuhan argued that the *medium* is the message: "this is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium ... result from the new scale that is introduced ... by new technology" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). He believed that the value of the vehicle of communication outweighed the actual content. Nonetheless, understanding the audience is just as important as selecting the appropriate communication tool:

There is a growing need on the part of a variety of people inside and outside the media and arts industries to become "audience minded". This is not just a management issue for upper levels of organisations; it is also an issue for various practitioners, from

journalists to exhibition curators to theatre producers. They share a common need to better understand their audiences, readers, users, visitors, voters and clients. (Balnaves & O'Regan, 2002, p. 1)

McLuhan suggested that television audiences can become part of the TV experience which will increase as television becomes more interactive. It is possible that increased interactivity will give public relations practitioners the opportunity to understand their audiences better:

The Internet allows us to monitor how long visitors stay on the site, which sections they go to, what they click on and more. If we have a section on the site that nobody goes to we can remove it because we know it's not what the people want. (Participant B, August 24, 2006)

This importance of understanding audiences and publics is discussed further in chapter four.

The Internet also allows publics to derive meaning without working too hard. Activist groups have the ability to broadcast content, except it also allows a level of involvement from publics that other mediums do not allow. This can be linked back to the variables in the situational theory of publics. The speed of messages allows members to be constantly updated on issues they care about, and allows publics to interact with other members. This demonstrates that the Internet can create a more active public by increasing the perceived level of involvement and problem recognition. However, to understand the fundamental dynamics of the Internet also requires an understanding of the nature of online publics. A number of factors unique to the Internet account for the speed with which activist groups can coalesce (Holtz, 2002, p. 281):

1. *The many-to-many mode* – Allows high quality materials and clearly articulated messages to be accessible to anyone who is interested in receiving them, overcoming political, geographical and physical boundaries;
2. *The receiver-driven mode* – There is no need to “distribute information to those who are not interested; activists can alert prospective colleagues to the existence of online activities;
3. *The Internet’s global reach* – Anyone in the world can become involved and motivated, regardless of their location, assuming they have access and share the language.

Various activist groups have embraced the Internet to help fight the consequences of organisations they find problematic. Established groups whose presence predates the use of the Internet in everyday life have considered it to be another tool to help increase their presence and further their cause. The Sierra Club is an example of a traditional activist group which incorporated the Internet to assist their cause. On their website they provided a section called *Take Action* which offered visitors the ability to send letters to targeted individuals who were in support of – or in opposition to – issues that mirror Sierra Club positions (Holtz, 2002).

### **3.3 Impediments to the Usefulness of Cyberactivism**

The case-study groups indicate that forms of Internet activism can build upon and enhance traditional methods of activity. Some of the advantages appear to be innovative improvements on ‘older’ technologies such as the telephone and fax machine in terms of speed and cost (Danitz & Strobel, 1999). Other advantages, like the levels of interaction between users, reflect the unique nature of the Internet.

However, there are also several disadvantages that can limit the effectiveness of cyberactivism. Some of the following points highlighted by Danitz and Strobel (1999) will be examined closely throughout the following chapters of this thesis:

- It is dangerous to rely solely on a single source of communication;
- Communications over the Internet can be easily monitored;
- Opponents may try to use the Internet for sabotage;
- Information transmitted on the Internet is “unmediated” and can sometimes be of questionable accuracy;
- The Internet cannot replace human contact in lobbying and other campaign activities.

While encouraging the use of cyberactivism, interviewees also recognised the downfalls of using computer-mediated-communication and were especially concerned with the possibility of security breaches: “Internet forums are susceptible to incursions from those allied, to groups with opposing views and media personnel who can find out about plans for action thus ruining many of the activists’ plans” (Participant B, August 24, 2006).

Other interviewees suggested that there is a risk of marginalising people who choose not to use the net or are unable to use it, and also risk losing the more personal aspects of community mobilisation by relying too heavily on CMC. Participant B said: “sitting in front of a computer spamming people is no substitute for getting on the phone, meeting face to face and building relationships the old fashioned way” (August 24, 2006).

### 3.4 Hacktivism

Hacktivism refers to the integration of activism with the hacking of computer systems (Pickerill, 2003). Although debate exists over what constitutes hacktivism, it can include “virtual sit-ins and denial-of-service attacks, e-mail bombing, website hacking, computer viruses, the disruption of databases and computer break-ins” (Pickerill, 2003, p. 124). None of the case-study groups conducted hacktivism, but several argued it had its place. In contrast to hacktivism, cyberactivism “tends not to be treated as illegal or as particularly disruptive to other CMC users” (Pickerill, 2003, p. 119).

The effectiveness of hacktivism to facilitate activists achieving their objectives remains debatable. None of the case-study groups performed actions constituted as hacktivism, yet none objected to others doing it:

It's not part of my strategy but if someone did it and it served a purpose, then fine. I'm not against breaking the law if it comes to the law. The law works in favour of the people who have got the money and power and you have to challenge that sometimes by getting arrested. (Participant F, September 12, 2006)

Likewise, although hacktivism was not officially condoned, it was seen to be justified in certain situations: “I think it has its place. Just as political graffiti does. There's legal issues with hacking into websites so I wouldn't endorse it in my professional capacity” (Participant E, September 14, 2006). Although the case-study groups had no objections to hacktivism, all agreed that viruses were a negative concept and served no benefit to the community.

### **3.5 The Future of Communication Technology**

As technology advances at an ever-increasing pace, current Internet tools improve “not just every year, but every month or every week” (Clarke, 2004, p. 22). Wireless (Wi-Fi) connections have become cheaper and far more accessible, allowing wireless connection to the Internet on portable devices such as laptops, PDAs and mobile phones. Current technological innovations have seen a convergence of technology, allowing devices to have greater capabilities. “Phones take on the functions of cameras and PDAs, PDAs are developing the function of computers, and computers are shrinking in size and weight, becoming truly portable” (Clarke, 2004, p. 22). Exploring the future of communication technologies and their impact on activist groups is beyond the scope of this project but is a possible area of further investigation.



# **4. Chapter Four: Tricks of the Trade - Cyberactivist Communication Modes**

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## **4.1 Introduction**

Cyberactivist groups are both facilitated by, and dependent on, the Internet. As new interactive functions of the Internet emerge, traditional communication methods are challenged and redefined. Technology is not a new phenomenon for activists. Historically, groups have incorporated NCTs to aid their causes, using whatever media they can to circulate information, make statements and raise awareness. This chapter identifies the role Internet communication tools play within the activist groups Information for Action, Stop the Toad Foundation, Yarragadee Community Action.

Compared to small and informal local groups, national and international organisations are quick to recognise and exploit the advantages of new communication technologies "to facilitate internal communication, to keep their (physically distant) members informed, to present themselves to outsiders via homepages, and to communicate with other groups" (van de Donk, et al., 2004, p. 15). Some argue the power of cyberactivism sounds ideal in theory but falls short of its success in reality because it may weaken and undermine traditional forms of activism. In the words of Randy Stoecker, (2000) "not only

is there the risk that the Internet is keeping us off the streets, but many of the relationships that we establish online will by their very nature remain superficial – faceless, one-dimensional stranger to stranger interaction.” Stocker’s statements are misleading and over reactive. He fails to recognise the most significant contribution computer-mediated-communication has given activists is the ability to reinforce physical interaction. Its function is more instrumental than symbolic.

The Internet offers interactive technologies which have enabled participation on a scale no other media can provide, yet this type of communication is usually ignored by cyberactivists with many having predetermined ‘static’ sites with no options for collaboration. Internet communication tools can be classified as either *synchronous* or *asynchronous* communication. Synchronous communication occurs when there is real-time interaction between users, usually via chat or instant-messaging. Asynchronous communication allows users to participate at different times. This refers to discussion forums or e-mail lists (Powazek, 2002). Both methods need to be integrated as each have strengths and weaknesses:

Asynchronous communication is often more convenient, but it lacks the visceral real-time impact that a live synchronous chat can have. And while a synchronous event has a strong emotional impact, they’re often more like a slow phone conversation than a well-thought-out exchange of letters. Asynchronous communication gives the participants more time to craft elegant responses. (Powazek, 2002, p. 13)

This chapter examines the Internet strategies of cyberactivists, finding that most communication is predominantly one-way, focusing on information dissemination of specific issues and causes. Before cyberactivism is explored, it will be useful to examine how activists functioned without the Internet and other forms of CMC.

## 4.2 Traditional Communication Methods

In-depth interviews with individuals whose activism predates Internet use is vital in understanding the traditional communication methods used. There was a predominant reliance upon distributing requests for mobilisation through existing networks of organisations. These networks are traditionally accessed using word of mouth, magazines, newsletter and flyers.

Before CMC and the Internet became a staple part of the activist's repertoire, the interviewees in this study were all dependent on similar tactics including meetings, telephoning, small run mail-outs, and notices in shop windows. Phone trees were used frequently:

You'd each have the number of two or three people you needed to call, so something happens and one person would ring three people. It was quite structured – who should ring who and pass the message on. So phone trees, or word of mouth were really important, any forms of grape vines of some description. You'd find out where everybody was and hand out a flyer or you'd go there and tell everybody. (Participant A, September 11, 2006)

This activist stated that activists have always had to know how to use information in the most effective and efficient ways. "They never had any money or time so they always had to find the cheapest, easiest and quickest ways of doing things. I kind of think that hasn't changed" (September 11, 2006).

Interviewees agreed that cyberactivism could not make traditional methods of activism redundant. They considered it an additional channel to complement and enhance communication rather than a replacement. One interviewee believed the Internet simply amplifies and expands the communication strategies, arguing they still have to be good strategies regardless of the communication technology.

However, the interviewee continued to suggest that large national and international organisations have almost replaced physical discussion/interactivity with CMC: "I think people start with large groups like Greenpeace, and if they seek more meaningful activism they'll eventually turn to local groups where they can get that physical interaction and discussion" (Participant C, August 23, 2006).

The power of phone calls was acknowledged, with participants agreeing that they could be a lot more successful if they picked up the phone, but continued not to do so. Letters were also found to be 'better' than e-mail because its ease has affected its value: "If you lobby your environment minister by e-mail you might get an automated reply or something really basic, but if you send them a physical letter you'll get a better reply" (Participant F, September 12, 2006). Participant B acknowledged that some 'older' channels have begun to fall by the wayside (e-mail is slowly phasing out faxing) however, "many organisations are still using traditional channels in addition to ensure messages get out to the maximum number of people" (August 24, 2006).

If cyberactivism does not replace activism, to what extent is the medium used? Participant C said that online communication was used in addition to traditional forms:

We tend to use the fax much less than we used to but I don't know if that can really be called a 'traditional' means of communication. Our newsletter now goes out electronically unless members request a paper copy – that saved on print costs but probably cost us a lot of readership because we always experience technical problems when trying to send the newsletter out – some subscribers can't access the documents, or they never receive them. Also some of our members don't use the Internet so they wouldn't be able to see the newsletters. (August 23, 2006)

### **4.3 Electronic Communication Tactics**

Some of the ways cyberactivists network and communicate with each other are through e-mail, websites, bulletin boards, discussion forums and internet-relay chat programs. Despite many activists employing e-mail to a high degree, many have a reluctance to make full use of online activities, restricting their ability to benefit from opportunities offered by the technology (Pickerill, 2003). CMC could be used for more than one-way information dissemination, notably as a tool to interact with participants and other publics, yet it appears many activists fail to implement this method.

#### **4.3.1 Technical Skills, Education & Training**

Despite increasing computer literacy and user-friendly software, CMC still requires a certain amount of skills (Walch, 1999). There was a strong variation in the levels of technical knowledge among the case-study groups, even though they shared similar world views in terms of their group ideology. Information for Action, Stop the Toad Foundation and Yarragadee Community Action are all small, local groups with an over-arching agenda for environmental sustainability.

While all had the skills required to use basic tools such as e-mail and surfing the web, some could create websites; others could only modify content to existing templates; and some had no knowledge of website design, requiring outsourced assistance. Interviewees acquired their technical skills to become cyberactivists through different paths. The Stop the Toad Foundation interviewee's understanding of computer-mediated tools was fairly slim, limiting the degree of communication features available on the site. She believed that one of her main obstacles as a cyberactivist was learning to use the Internet to its full potential because this would require investing a large amount of time:

To find out how to do this and that and where to put information and get it up is a real time-user and therefore you're not that familiar with it. I think if I'd used the Internet more and become savvier with it, we'd probably be getting more people. (September 6, 2006)

A lack of available resources was also considered a reason for lack of technical skills for some of the other interviewees. They understood they were never going to be able to use top professionals because of the cost involved:

I joined Volunteering WA to learn how to use a computer because I didn't want to get a degree in it. I'm never going to get the top trained people in the world so I rely on those who are on the borderline. (Participant F, September 12, 2006)

All groups had a small skills base, relying solely on the technical skills of one or two people, and giving them great responsibility and power. This became a problem for interviewees who wanted to incorporate interactive tools such as surveys and message boards, which could improve their understanding of their publics, only to be told that it couldn't be done (without valid justification).

Case-study groups who had no website management skills and relied on outsourcing found it particularly frustrating. The YCA interviewee's reasons for learning to use Dreamweaver and web content management was out of a necessity to learn and a desire for independence:

One of the reasons why I chose to do the web stuff and writing the stories and putting links and files on the net was part of the process... because I didn't have the skills. I felt like I was interrupting the guy who did have the skills who set up the website for us... that costs money. I would ask him to put a link to a news story and four days later it *might* be there. I finally got the guy to show me through the steps with basic text stuff and I'm happy because I've now got a template to work from. (Participant E, September 14, 2006).

The reliance on voluntary skills is important to observe - if groups want to do something but lack the resources, they seek out volunteers to assist. Differences in available resources between groups also affects the extent to which the Internet is used (Edwards, 2004). Highly resourced groups are more likely to have content-rich sites with attractive layouts and more technical options. They are also more 'net savvy' because they have the financial means to buy the necessary hardware and hire specialists who know how to implement new tools (Davis, 1999; van de Donk et al., 2004). A YCA interviewee admitted:

There's no way we could run a similar campaign that Water Corporation is running, in all major media including commercial radio and TV during prime time news bulletins. We don't get that penetration and really, to try and compete on those terms wouldn't serve any purpose... doing it on the cheap. (Participant E, September 14, 2006)

Davis (1999) found in his research that ongoing maintenance may be difficult for activist organisations due to staffing costs. This is why many groups are "dependent on the know-how of volunteers and their willingness to invest time" (Edwards, 2004, p. 188).

#### **4.3.2 Creating New Avenues of Access**

The interviewees consider cyberactivism a way to assist with creating new avenues of access to information they want to distribute (Pickerill, 2003). Cyberactivists use the Internet as a cost-effective alternative to reach a wide audience. It helps eliminate publishing costs and saves time by speaking to individuals simultaneously (a call-to-action e-mail alert can be sent to thousands of people at once). STTF Community Action Meetings were publicised on the Internet through e-newsletters and PDF pamphlets uploaded to the website:



Figure 4.3.2.1 Call of the Toad Community Action Meeting pamphlet.

STTF felt it was important to combine online with offline tactics in order to be effective (using the Internet to promote the offline activities). "It is the merger of online tactics with existing methods which holds most potential for increasing the impact of environmentalists' actions" (Pickerill. 2003, p. 130).



Distribution of the notice online made it accessible to a global audience, possibly capturing the attention of those who may not have participated in other activist campaigns. New avenues of access may be ideal, but not necessarily preferred. There is a push by one of the case-study groups to make their monthly environmental newspaper an online-only publication, but feedback from subscribers revealed they preferred it to be printed: "There's certain editorial rules I don't like about it that you wouldn't be presented with if it was on an electronic basis. There's a requirement to keep traditional media there as well; it's a complementary tool to the web" (Participant E, September 14, 2006).

#### **4.3.3 Mobilisation, Solidarity and Network Cohesion**

Mobilising participation is a crucial function for many cyberactivist groups. They aim to mobilise existing participants to partake in specific activities, or to motivate the general public to become involved (Pickerill, 2003). The purpose for mobilisation is group-specific and the methods for targeting, and who is targeted, vary. For example, one of Stop the Toad Foundation's key needs was to attract activists to the Kimberley to help remove cane toads in their 'Great Toad Muster' campaign. To reach a wide audience, traditional and NCT tactics were combined to promote the campaign. Traditional methods of meetings, posters, flyers and brochures were complemented with e-mail newsletters and updates, as well as electronic copies of all printed material accessible on the Stop the Toad Foundation site.

#### **4.3.4 Mobilising Participation through the Internet**

All case-study groups used the Internet to mobilise participation, either exclusively or complementary to traditional communication methods. Pickerill (2003) identified key processes through which cyberactivists use CMC to mobilise

participation: (a) Gateway to activism; (b) Raising the profile of campaigns; (c) Mobilising online activism; (d) Online lobbying as a tactic of protest; (e) Effectiveness of online lobbying; (f) Decentralisation: Stimulating local action; and (g) Attracting participants to offline protests.

(a) *Gateway to activism*

The Internet has given cyberactivists a universal audience with whom they can publicise and discuss their causes. Pickerill (2003) calls this a gateway to activism, a starting point from where potential participants can join. The use of the Internet provides visible entry to arenas previously challenged by limited awareness in mainstream channels. In turn, this may assist with recruiting new participants previously unconnected to activism. It would be extremely challenging for Information for Action to exist without the use of the Internet: "how could you get thousands of people to send their letters to their governments globally in seven different languages and make it so it's only in Perth" (Participant F, September 12, 2006).

(b) *Raising the profile of campaigns*

Using the Internet to raise the profile of campaigns, cyberactivists indirectly support their attempts at mobilisation. Organisations like Information for Action have been able to generate media coverage because of their unconventional activist methods. IFA's style of online lobbying was seen as innovative at the time of printing, allowing the group to get coverage in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (see below):

### **Online lobbyist for the green cause**

By Sam Varghese

December 5, 2003

An osteopath from Western Australia has set up an online resource for environment-conscious people, including those who want to lobby politicians on issues which are dear to their hearts.

Rowland Benjamin said he had been running Information for Action for around four years but decided on a formal launch in order to publicise the fact that such a site exists. The organisation is incorporated as a not-for-profit body.

Parts of the site are now online in seven languages - the bulk of the information is in English, but most of the letters and all the home pages are also available in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Japanese and Chinese.

Benjamin, 48, said he used his own funds for any expenses in connection with running the site, such as hosting. "The pages are done using a text editor, we have no fancy software," he said. The site has information on global, environmental, and social issues, from poverty, aid and debt, to deforestation and biodiversity, collected from scientific journals, newspapers, magazines and the internet.

Benjamin said the organisation had helped in 29 campaigns in over 100 countries, all through the website. "We have been getting an average of 658 emails each month. A total of 2597 letters and 10,283 emails have been sent since February 21, 2001," he said.

However, despite the high traffic to the site, Benjamin said the number of people sending letters to lobby for issues was low. The site has form letters on a multitude of issues in different countries and the way to use them is clearly explained on the site's help page.

"The contact details of around 2500 politicians from a large number of countries are on the site and we have informed these polities that their details are provided," he said. "Nobody has objected."

Benjamin said he had always been interested in the environment. "It's a matter of priorities - if we continue to abuse the environment, there won't be a human species around very long," he said. "All the rights in the world will be of no use if we aren't around to enjoy them."

Figure 4.3.4.1. Sydney Morning Herald article on Information for Action.

(c) ***Mobilising online activism***

The net has been used to extend new tactics into the realm of cyberactivism. CMC assists with the formation, coordination and distribution of activist strategy. Activist groups are using cyberactivism because access is relatively cheap and communication can be decentralised. Costs are low, with many embracing websites as an efficient method for publishing material.

(d) ***Online lobbying as a tactic of protest***


All case-study groups advocated internet-based forms of activism and utilised CMC as a medium through which they could lobby.

**Stop the Toad Foundation**

The STTF encourage website visitors to send an online petition to local members of parliament, urging the government to take all possible action to stop cane toads invading Western Australia. Users simply include their contact details and then click 'send'. The website presents an identifiable image of the organisation and looks professional. The website has been designed with consideration for readability – stories are succinct and accompanied with images to give them extra appeal. The group's publications are all designed consistently with the same colours, format, design and images. The news portal is frequently updated which gives the impression that the organisation is very active.

# STOP THE TOAD

## KEEP WA CANE TOAD FREE



Welcome to the website of Stop The Toad Foundation (Inc)

The Hon Alan Carpenter, WA Premier  
 The Hon Clare Martin, Chief Minister Northern Territory  
 The Hon Ian Campbell, Federal Minister for the Environment and Heritage

Dear Sirs/Madam

Please, ensure that your governments take all possible action to stop cane toads from invading Western Australia.

The cane toad's rampage through Qld and the NT has already caused the local extinction of animals like quolls and some goanna species and the impacts on fresh water crocodiles, snakes and birds are bound to be just as devastating. This toxic feral pest eats any native animal that will fit into its mouth. It poisons anything that bites it or picks it up. It is toxic even at egg and tadpole stage. It is extinction in motion.

If cane toads cross the WA border they will quickly infest the vast Ord River system. Ecological damage to the unique Kimberley region will be swift and irreversible. Ecologists project that cane toads will eventually extend as far south as Margaret River and Esperance.

The Kimberley is now the only part of northern mainland Australia free of this noxious invader. It is vital that we move decisively to protect our biodiversity heritage and WA's most vulnerable citizens, the Aboriginal communities whose cultural existences rely upon both totem and bush tucker. The loss of such native species will have a huge impact on the growing nature tourism economy of the region and many other negative social, economic and environmental effects.

Western Australians simply do not want cane toads infesting their back yards, their wetlands, their public places. We cannot afford it and we will not accept inaction. We call on you to help us to prevent this imminent invasion.

We support the strong call from the Kimberley community for a pre-emptive cane toad control program to be undertaken urgently to halt the westward progress of the cane toad. We welcome your increased efforts but you must keep this issue a top priority.

This is an environmental crisis that transcends the traditional boundaries of region or jurisdiction or party politics. It requires your co-operation with each other and with the community to forestall a tragedy during your term of office.

Senator Campbell, please ensure that the Australian Government does all it can to support WA and NT in this race against time. We urge you to continue the search for an appropriate biological control but also to fund on-ground control and eradication initiatives.

In a crisis such as this a community has the chance to surpass itself, to unite and pull together. We expect our elected representatives find something out of the ordinary as well. We believe that the cane toad can be stopped if we work together. This is what we ask of you now. Urgent ongoing action. Cooperative, complimentary, unstinting action. Now, and until the job is done.

Your additional comments (optional):

Yours sincerely,

**Name \***

**Type**

**Number of people represented**

**Postal address**

**City/Town**

**State**

**Post code**

**Country**

**Email address \***

\* essential

**Kimberley**

Please help us by identifying your interest in this area (you may check more than one box)

☐ Have visited the area

☐ Intend to visit the area

☐ Would like to visit the area

☐ Liveback in the area

[Send my letters](#)

When you support the STOP THE TOAD Campaign you may receive occasional updates. No details given here will be made available to any other organisation. [Read our Privacy Policy](#)

Figure 4.3.4.2. Stop the Toad Foundation online lobbying page.



### **Yarragadee Community Action**

Leading up to the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) public submissions on the Yarragadee issue, YCA encouraged visitors to fill in downloadable pro-formas. The comments from the public are intended to assist the EPA to prepare reports in which recommendations will be made to government:

It wasn't just one page with text and you sign your name at the bottom (they were available as well). They were handed out person to person so if you had any concerns about it you could discuss it with the person who handed it out. On the web, what we said was here's something you can discuss in point form with about ten points with empty spaces underneath. We handed those out at meetings as we had an expert panel public meeting, there was empty space for people to write their main points from those submission. That becomes a personal submission, so it's a combination of stuff downloadable off the net and documents handed out at public meetings. (Participant E, September 14, 2006)

Individuals were also encouraged to print off a copy of a Yarragadee Water Supply Development petition and send to members of parliament. After submission dates ended, YCA used its website to post the public EPA submissions, attempting to trigger political responses. The website appears to act merely as an information portal. It is rich in content but lacks interactive features. There is no 'About Us' section which makes it confusing to decipher why the Conservation Council of Western Australia's contact details are on the site – it is because the YCA site comes under the CCWA umbrella network. The website has no features to facilitate community building or communication between individuals.

## Save the Yarragadee

[View Current Signatures](#) - [Sign the Petition](#)

**To: the Honourable Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled**

We the undersigned, strongly object to the Yarragadee Water Supply Development because the proposal is environmentally unsound, and will threaten the unique biodiversity of the South West.

Taking water from the Yarragadee Aquifer on the scale that is proposed is unsustainable for both the community, and the ecosystem of the Blackwood River Region.

We call upon the Legislative Assembly to reject this proposal due to the significant negative environmental and social consequences that will occur if the development goes ahead.

Sincerely,

[The Undersigned](#)

[Click Here to Sign Petition](#)

[View Current Signatures](#)

The [Save the Yarragadee](#) Petition to the Honourable Speaker and Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia in Parliament assembled was created by [Friends of the Yarragadee](#) and written by Adrian (Ado) Trivett ([murec@internode.on.net](mailto:murec@internode.on.net)). This petition is hosted here at [www.PetitionOnline.com](http://www.PetitionOnline.com) as a public service. There is no endorsement of this petition, express or implied, by [Artifice, Inc.](#) or our sponsors. For technical support please use our simple [Petition Help](#) form.

[Send this to a friend](#)

[Send Petition to a Friend](#) - [Petition FAQ](#) - [Start a Petition](#) - [Contributions](#) - [Privacy](#) - [Media Kit](#) - [Comments and Suggestions](#)

[PetitionOnline](#) - [DesignCommunity](#) - [ArchitectureWeek](#) - [Great Buildings](#) - [Search](#)

<http://www.PetitionOnline.com/Yaragade/petition.html>© 1999-2005 [Artifice, Inc.](#) - All Rights Reserved.


Figure 4.3.4.3. Yarragadee Community Action online lobbying page.

### **Information for Action**

The whole foundation of Information for Action operates as an automated lobbying service. Individuals can conveniently lobby their leaders through the website as it provides information on who to contact, what to say, and where to send it.

Users click on a subject they are interested in and access information about the topic, and suggestions to what they can do to help. They can then click on their country and state, which then brings up a list of leaders directly associated with that topic. Once a leader has been chosen, the petition form is automatically filled in, only requiring the individual to fill in their contact details. The site is generally poorly designed. The logo is messy and difficult to recognise due to the clashing colours. There is too much content on each subject and the font is quite small which may put off some visitors from reading all the text. Images are dispersed throughout the pages in a slapdash way and some have no relevance to the text. The newsletter page is outdated and is purely text-based so reading it could be a futile process for some visitors.





# Information for Action

Select a Subject

## Coral Reefs: Australia: Western Australia

Click on a box in the column on the left to send a letter

**Home Page**

**Search Databases**

**Site Help**

Continue

Click on the box to load the letter into the form

Preview E-mail
Preview Letter
Send E-mail
Send Fax

To:	Mark McGowan BA LLB MLA
Position:	Minister for the Environment, WA Australia
Organisation:	Department of Environment
Address:	29th floor Allendale Square, 77 St George's Terrace, Perth, WA, 6000
E-mail:	mark-mcgowan@dpc.wa.gov.au
Fax:	61 8 9221 4665.
From:	<input type="text"/>
Address:	<input type="text"/>
E-mail:	<input type="text"/>
Subject:	Coral Reefs

I wish to raise my concerns regarding the environmental damage occurring on our coral reefs.

Land based pollution from agriculture, urban development and industry cause rising levels of nutrients and toxicity, which have killed off much of the inshore corals. Residential and tourist developments are clearing coastal land that is vital to the reef ecosystem. Unsustainable and destructive fishing throughout most of the reef is continuing. The discharge of ballast water from ships can contain foreign species, which damage our local marine environment.

May I request your support in striving to minimise the effects of all developments on the delicate reef environment before one of our most precious attractions is irrecoverably destroyed. We do not know enough about our coral reefs and more funding should be available for research. In particular we need to monitor changes that are occurring so that we can implement necessary action to prevent further damage to these important ecosystems.

Please introduce legislation to protect our reefs. We should designate at least 50 percent of all coral reefs as no-take ecological reserves. The remainder must be managed by a well funded 'Parks and Wildlife Organization' to ensure they are not damaged by tourism or over-fishing. We must protect our coral reefs and use them sustainably.

Premier of WA Australia  
The Hon. Alan J Carpenter MLA

Minister for the Environment,  
WA Australia  
Mark McGowan BA LLB MLA

Minister for Agriculture and  
Food; Forestry; the Midwest  
and Wheatbelt, WA Australia  
The Hon. Kim M Chance MLC

Minister for Fisheries  
The Hon. Jon Ford MLC

Minister for Local Government  
and Regional Development;  
Fisheries; the Kimberley;  
Pilbara and Gascoyne, WA  
Australia  
The Hon. Jon R Ford MLA

Minister for Planning and  
Infrastructure, WA Australia  
The Hon. Alannah MacTieman  
MLA

Minister for Energy; Science  
and Innovation, WA Australia  
The Hon. Francis M LOGAN BA  
Hons MLA

Figure 4.3.4.4. Information for Action online lobbying page.

(e) *Effectiveness of online lobbying*

All participants said that e-mail is easier than writing and printing formal letters, and that a group would get a higher response from online petitions than if users had to write letters without any suggestions or content guidelines. It is possibly because it is a lot easier to fill out and submit a form, rather than write a letter from scratch. Form filling as opposed to letter writing, does not require an individual to invest copious amounts of time or energy:

I'm quite happy to sign online petitions and I do because you don't have to think – it's easier to look and fill out a form than be faced with a blank screen... but I'm sceptical of their effectiveness. I'd be surprised if they actually worked. (Participant A, September 11, 2006)

The effect of online lobbying was difficult to evaluate for the case-study groups, with some interviewees suggesting they are pointless. This is because none understood how to evaluate effectively, which will be outlined further in chapter five.

(f) *Decentralisation: Stimulating local action*

Using the Internet to mobilise participation via information distribution stimulates the coordination of local activists (Pickerill, 2003). Using an international focus, IFA provides relevant and useful information by being generalised: "When we talk about wetlands, we talk about wetlands all over the world so people can apply the information to their situations" (Participant F, September 12, 2006).

On the other hand, the focus of YCA is very geographically specific. YCA has facilitated the participation for both Perth and South-West citizens

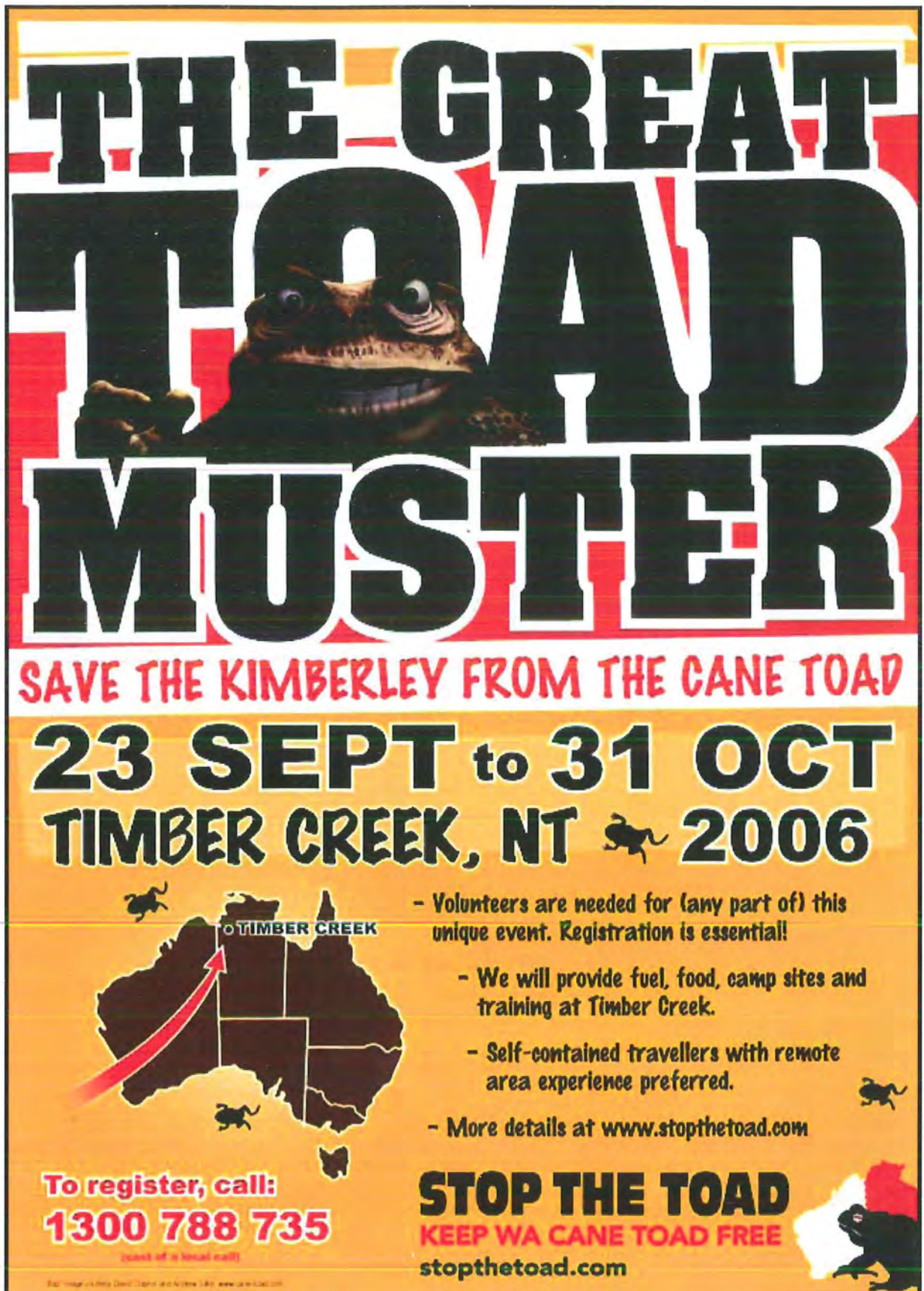
through e-mail because the issue affects both areas. This allowed both areas to overcome the issue of regional remoteness and unite to discuss and take action on impending issues.

(g) *Attracting participants to offline protests*

Pickerill (2003, p. 99) believes stimulating participation in existing protests (rather than creation of local action) is likely to be one of the most difficult aspects of mobilisation because of the additional barrier of distance. At STTF's Great Toad Muster, CMC was used in addition to traditional methods of mobilisation to attract participants to the Kimberley (see overleaf for the printed campaign poster). The group attempted to attract support from a wide audience and reach those already involved in environmental causes as they were likely to become involved. Using existing network ties to the Conservation Council of Western Australia umbrella network, STTF were able to reach like-minded subscribers already involved in activist causes. However, the response rate is unknown as no measures were put in place for evaluating this method.

While some question its usefulness, arguing that word of mouth is the main way of getting information out, I found STTF's website a particularly useful mobilising tool. I'd read about the 'Call of the Toad' community action meetings via the site and would not have gone if it was not promoted on the Internet.






**THE GREAT TOAD MUSTER**

**SAVE THE KIMBERLEY FROM THE CANE TOAD**

**23 SEPT to 31 OCT**  
**TIMBER CREEK, NT 2006**

 **TIMBER CREEK**

- Volunteers are needed for (any part of) this unique event. Registration is essential!
- We will provide fuel, food, camp sites and training at Timber Creek.
- Self-contained travellers with remote area experience preferred.
- More details at [www.stophethetoad.com](http://www.stophethetoad.com)

**To register, call:**  
**1300 788 735**  
(toll free in local calls)

**STOP THE TOAD**  
**KEEP WA CANE TOAD FREE**  
**[stophethetoad.com](http://stophethetoad.com)**

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Figure 4.3.4.5. The Great Toad Muster campaign poster.

#### **4.3.5 Drawing Strength from International Linkages**

Not only is the Internet useful for communicating within groups, but it also creates and reinforces connections between cyberactivist groups. YCA made linkages between South-West WA and Perth out of necessity because the areas are affected by the issue.

Information for Action depends on relationships with international volunteers who assist by translating content in their own languages. So far, the whole website is available in seven languages.

The lack of international connection in STTF and YCA's campaigns might have something to do with the issues themselves. The campaigns are specific to a Western Australian agenda, although the issues affect other communities nationally and internationally. Although the issue of cane toads has affected states like Queensland for some time, STTF did not seek assistance from individuals experienced in running other cane toad campaigns:

The campaign was purely devised in-house through experienced people who have worked on other conservation campaigns. They're bringing that experience to this, and that's why the website was generated and that's why the newsletter was made because they've been used in the past and have been quite successful. We do a lot of our own promoting through e-mails and public meetings, it's not through other cane toad organisations. (Participant G, September 6, 2006)

This is interesting because it reflects the philosophy of many of these small groups who appear to actively resist sharing information or learning from the experiences of other groups, such as thinking laterally and embracing new approaches; or learning from the knowledge or potential of a wider membership base.

## 4.4 Interactive Communication

Interactivity plays a key role on the web and is a distinguishing attribute traditional media does not have (to the same degree). While levels of interactivity over the Internet can enhance the relationship and collaboration between cyberactivist groups and their publics, many fail to embrace its use as outlined below. In fact, the term *interactivity* contains varying degrees of meanings:

- (a) *Transmissional interactivity* allows visitors to subscribe to services, including news alerts and e-mail updates. It allows the user a degree of control, or rather choice, over what is otherwise a chronologically fixed or programmed information flow;
- (b) *Registrational interactivity* monitors the movements of users (for example, cookies), collecting information created by visitors who have no control over how it will be used. It is interactive from the producer's, not user's point of view;
- (c) *Consultational interactivity* invites visitors to access information, but provides no options for modifying or responding to content;
- (d) *Conversational interactivity* suggests two-way communication flow, with both partners producing and inputting their own information; and, often more than this, working to create something (Jensen, 1999; Meikle, 2002).

## 4.5 Online Tools of Communication

Although there are an enormous number of tools used to support CMC, case-study groups chose e-mail and websites as their favourite methods of online communication. Participant F preferred e-mail over instant communication tools like Internet relay chat or instant messaging because e-mail removes the pressure to give an immediate response: "I don't like MSN messenger where a message pops up straight away. I like e-mail so when I want to reply I do it at my own speed" (September 12, 2006).

### 4.5.1 E-mail

E-mail is one of the most used tools on the Internet and one of the most used CMC tools within activist groups. It connects individuals in a personal and immediate way, a unique characteristic other tools lack (for example, bulletin boards and online forums). Interviewees believed e-mail to be the most important tool for Internet communication. Participant B noted that message boards seem to be less of a hit in WA activist organisations, and Participant D had experienced similar findings: "We ran a message board briefly which was not very successful" (August 17, 2006).

E-mail was used for notifications and to alert people to events; to plan; to debate and to coordinate. Interviewees also noted that e-mail networks are becoming an essential part of staying abreast of campaigns. From its heavy use, Participant D believed e-mail to be devalued: "Rule of thumb is that an e-mail is about ten per cent as persuasive as a conversation with someone" (August 17, 2006).

### 4.5.2 Websites

Websites not only house large amounts of information, but are also fast and flexible in adapting to changing circumstances (Holt, 2004). Websites can be text-based, or use a wealth of features such as video, audio, images and personalised features as options for visitors. Although some of the larger cyberactivist sites provide sophisticated, interactive tools, smaller groups focus on offering only information.

Case-study groups' reasons for establishing an online presence were aligned with the goals of the organisations. All felt that the Internet could provide increased information dissemination and act as a resource for existing and potential members.

#### **Stop the Toad Foundation Website**

Using the Internet and creating a website were two of the first tactics STTF devised during the initial stages of the organisation to broaden their message distribution network and to have a reference tool that people could access to find the organisation:

There was definitely the information side of it. It was probably the main thing and then flowed on from that was what activities they could do. So for people that were concerned about it, they could use the Internet to search and then it would answer not only questions of information, but the questions of what sort of actions they could do. (Participant G, September 6, 2006).


The website is information rich with a link full of publications the group has created, ranging from posters, brochures, newsletters and news items.









# STOP THE TOAD

## KEEP WA CANE TOAD FREE

Welcome to the website of Stop The Toad Foundation (Inc)

-  [Home](#)
-  [About Us](#)
-  [News](#)
-  [How to Help](#)
-  [Publications](#)
-  [Media](#)
-  [Wish List](#)
-  [Donate](#)
-  [Links](#)
-  [Contact us](#)
-  [Site Map](#)

Get your Stop The Toad here...


Web Master:  
Use this button to  
link back to this site.

**HOT topics:**

[THE GREAT TOAD MUSTER](#) - underway now

["UNDER THREAT" - Art Exhibition Fundraiser](#) - 3 to 31 October

[Our Wish List](#) - things we need

[Sponsor a trap](#)

[Drinking wine - stops toads](#)

### Toads close to the WA border

Cane toads have changed the biological landscape of Qld, Northern NSW and the NT in disastrous and irreversible ways. And now they are on Western Australia's doorstep.

Ecologists warn that, unless stopped, cane toads will colonise Perth. They may even infest areas as far south as Margaret River and Esperance.



[Hear the cane toad call \(mp3\)](#)

[More on how cane toads threaten WA's environments and economy ...](#)

### Can they be stopped?


The bad news is that cane toads are approaching the WA border. The red line indicates the likely 'current front line' for toads but we now know for certain until the waters recede from this wet season.

As you can see, we are talking about defending a line roughly the length of Tasmania.

The good news is that we can, and we are, doing something about this threat and that many people are ready to fight to keep WA cane toad free.

WA is the first state to seriously attempt to prevent a cane toad invasion. A defense is now being mounted and everyone is called on to [help](#).

[Click to get larger image in new window](#)



### What is being done?

It is shaping up to be a landmark campaign ... people vs. toads ... and in preparation we're seeing unprecedented levels of cooperation, across state borders and between Government agencies and community groups.

The WA Government was committed \$6.1M to the battle so far. The Federal Government \$904,000

CALM has begun a major community awareness campaign and runs an on-ground trapping and monitoring program from Kununurra.

Also out of Kununurra, 'toadbuster' volunteers go out most weekends to trap, hand collect, and monitor toads.

The Stop the Toad Foundation fosters a strategic, integrated, whole-of-community approach and offers direct support to groups and individuals undertaking on-ground activities. It conducts its own on-ground operations, and endeavours to fill gaps left by other groups. See [THE GREAT TOAD MUSTER](#)

As a result, tens of thousands of westward heading toads are no more!

[What you can do to help](#)

Supported by

Figure 4.5.2.1. Stop the Toad Foundation website.



### Information for Action Website

Information for Action was created to assist individuals to lobby their leaders by giving them the right information. The website is a 'one stop shop' for environmental information, spawned from the problem of information-overload: "We get too much information, that's the problem. We're frozen because there's so much information so I thought I'd simplify it, repackage it and make it easily accessible" (Participant F, September 12, 2006). This centralised lobbying service lists dozens of international contacts sorted by category, including: animals; the environment; global warming; and chemicals. The hope was that establishing an online presence would, in turn, shift awareness into action: "to bring people together globally to create that critical mass and to get that tipping point where you've got that awareness turning into laws" (Participant F, September 12, 2006).



Figure 4.5.2.2. Information for Action website.

## Yarragadee Community Action Website

Providing an alternative voice on the Yarragadee aquifer was the main purpose of the Yarragadee Community Action site. The website was a way to express community concern and to provide a starting point for people who were concerned about Yarragadee and the impact taking the water away would have:

The website was designed particularly to provide not an anti, but a concerned, perspective that wasn't Water Corporation or the Department of Water. It was a bunch of concerned scientists from Edith Cowan University, University of Western Australia and Murdoch providing scientific information that critiqued what Water Corporation had put forward. (Participant E, September 14, 2006)



Figure 4.5.2.3. Yarragadee Community Action website.



4.5.3 Blogs

At the time of conducting interviews, STTF's 'Great Toad Muster' event had not started, but the group planned to use a blog to update progress, through pictures and a 'Toad Times' newsletter. The STTF interviewee looked forward to embracing the feature: "We're going to try and have a blog... I've never used a blog. I've only just looked at them so it'll be interesting to see how that will work for the muster. It will be much more active and happening, maybe people will be able to put up their experiences and comments and stuff like that" (Participant G, September, 2006).

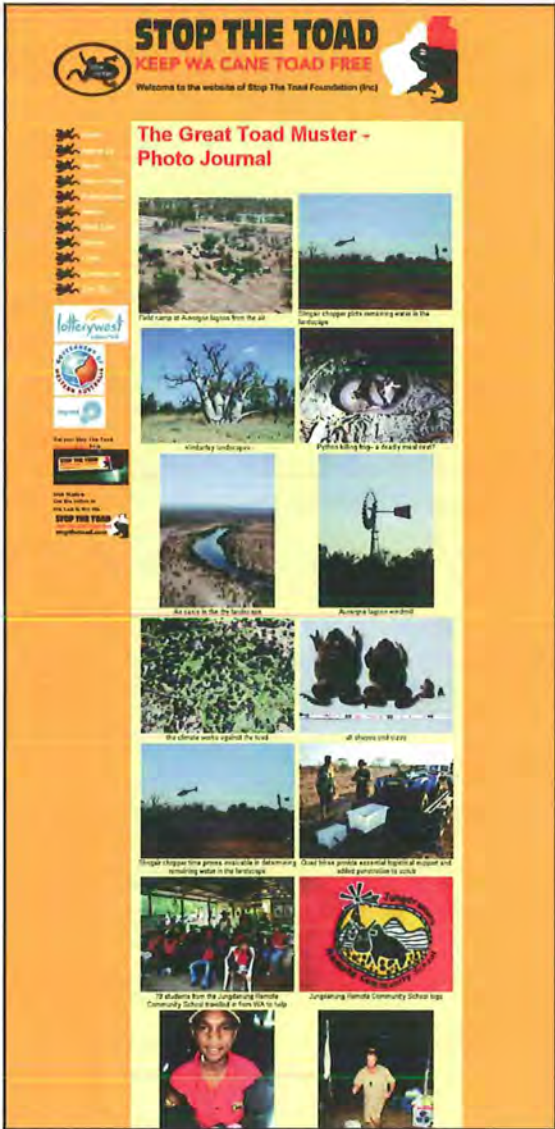


Figure 4.5.2.4. Stop the Toad Foundation photo-blog.

## 4.6 Reticence to Employ Online Tactics

### 4.6.1 Access and Security

Ready mobilisation of participants is an important ability for cyberactivism to be effective, yet it is not always a possibility. Those with access discovered that restrictions imposed affected *how* they could use the Internet for their efforts, thus limiting the usefulness of the technology. Van de Donk, et al. (2004) suggest groups fear surveillance by control agencies which may monitor or infiltrate electronic communication. The threat of surveillance has led many activist groups to use forms of Internet communication cautiously.

When members from The Wilderness Society saw my potential interview questions they became very concerned about outsiders getting access to campaigning methods. For example, Gunns Ltd., Australia's biggest native-forest logging company, put a SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation) on The Wilderness Society in Tasmania. The WA chapter of The Wilderness Society were concerned that the nature of my research would require them to divulge information that could compromise the group. They informed me that their involvement may damage the organisation because their answers could be used against them if other organisations decided to take legal action.

During my research, the YCA interviewee mentioned a defamation action happening in Perth concerning construction company BGC so there was a security-focus among many groups. This focus on security meant that many interviewees acknowledged the Internet was a public domain, and therefore was not secure:

I think if there was to be a bulletin board it would need to be strictly controlled so "who are you, why are you joining" so very much a

gatekeeper role as to who has access to this information and once you have where it gets disseminated, users expect information to remain within the group and suddenly it gets pushed outside and you get spiky attacks from outsiders asking why are you doing this and that and they have no business asking that. (Participant E, September 14, 2006)

Monitoring online content would be an ideal strategy, but unfortunately is not practical as none of the case-study groups have the human resources to do so. Most interviewees agreed cyberactivism occurs in the public domain, with only a handful believing the Internet could be anonymous (with reference to one-on-one modes such as e-mail). Participant C was adamant that users remember that the medium is dominated by governments and large corporations, was designed by the US military and is subject to all kinds of covert and overt surveillance.

If participants were able to afford to learn basic technical skills they would not be so paranoid about security, because they would know how to manage content more effectively. If certain areas were restricted and required users to have a login and password, they would be able to monitor their visitors. However, this is not guaranteed as virtual identities can be forged and manipulated, so realistically it is difficult to identify if the person behind the username is really who they claim to be.

---

#### **4.6.2 The Legalities of Interactivity**

Aside from monitoring considerations, there are also legal implications cyberactivists must consider if they are to provide interactive modes on their sites. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) stipulates that site owners are responsible for *all* content on their websites, even content posted by members and visitors. That means if a visitor posts false accusations against another individual or business on a cyberactivist's site, that group is held liable if action is taken.

As long as the material in dispute is removed quickly, no legal proceedings should occur. Cyberactivists who have interactive features on their sites should have a disclaimer outlining that the site owners have the right to remove any content for any reason, and even a DMCA compliance page. Privacy statements, terms of service and posting guidelines should also be outlined to clarify what is and is not acceptable behaviour. Groups should also make it clear that they take no responsibility for the websites links on their pages.

#### **4.6.3 Information Dissemination over Interactivity**

Research in the area of Internet communication revealed an absence of the use of the Internet's interactive capabilities (van de Donk, et al., 2004). This research reinforces the idea that cyberactivists largely see computer-mediated communication as one-way, the group providing the visitor with information. Although most have an e-mail address, only a few provide interactive tools like chat rooms, discussion boards and voice over IP (voIP).

None of the case-study groups included real-time chat or instant messaging services on their sites because they were designed as information dissemination portals, not two-way communication channels. Rosenkrand's (2000) analysis of nine anti-corporate sites supported this, discovering that interactivity features like real-time chat for users was not a proffered option on most activist sites. He adds that the majority of the sites are quite simplistic, with sound and video files being available usually only on sites with advanced media centres. A lack of education and training is a contributing factor as to why this occurs, as is a lack of resources and full-time activists. The Internet is an interesting channel, but despite the invisibility of humans behind it, it still needs someone to input information, and do the work.

In spite of a general deficiency in two-way interactive features, most websites offer plenty of 'superficial' ways to get involved. "Users are invited to take part in specific campaigns, not only by sending financial donations, but also by means of a number of tools specific to the Internet" (Rosenkrands, 2004, p. 72). The main CMC form of action used by case-study groups were online petitions; a common link these forms of participation have is they are fast, effortless and make no obligation for users to register for access.

Information dissemination and retrieval were the most common uses of the Internet, and was used as a complementary tool to offline efforts, providing information to members and the wider public (Davis, 1999). A problematic finding of this work revealed the absence of encouragement/interest in opinion-sharing. Again, most sites provided e-mail addresses, but the option for two-way discussion on specific issues was unavailable. According to Davis:

Such solicitations pose serious problems for group leadership because they provide opportunities for members as well as others outside of the organisation to take control of the group's agenda. In line with this, discussion forums were seemingly used as mobilisation instruments, but not for opinion formation. (cited in Edwards, 2004, p. 187)

A lack of interactive features on the Stop the Toad Foundation website was a result of trial and error. STTF had put a discussion forum link on their site, but removed it after it failed to attract participants. Participant G said there was a lack of web users logging in and posting comments. She even wrote a couple of comments to try to kick-start discussion, but it did not get a strong response so it was eventually removed. In spite of this, the STTF website has become more interactive as the campaign progresses to the extent of allowing users to lobby the government and click on staff and send them an e-mail. A common thread found among all case-study groups was that all the sites evolved as the life of the groups progress.



Van de Donk, et al. (2004) also noticed a lack of referral to like-minded groups on activists' sites. International organisations tended to refer links of their national sites (Greenpeace refers to their numerous national sites) yet hardly any of the smaller cyberactivists mentioned in the research refer the visitor to sites of similar nature.

The Stop the Toad Foundation site is the only case study which contradicts these findings. The links section on the website provides the visitor with a selection of similar links ranging from government departments to other campaigns associated with the cause.



Figure 4.6.3.1. Stop the Toad Foundation links.

Information for Action contained no links to other environmental sites. However, Yarragadee Community Action site included links to five other sites related rather narrowly to the issue. If the case-study groups linked properly, it is more likely they would capture a larger audience; unfortunately they do not, so they have to rely on other means.

#### **4.7 Reliance upon Non-CMC Interaction and Networks**

Arguably without reliance on non-CMC interaction and networks, cyberactivists remain unknown to a larger sector of the population, leveraging impact to a limited environment. This is why all case studies attempted to use mass media channels at some stage (although one participant questioned whether reliance on the mass media was really 'activism'). Information for Action was reluctant to use the media because they felt threatened by uncontrolled communication; instead, communication efforts to promote the organisation were conducted via the Internet. However, in the other case-study groups, CMC was used only as a contribution to traditional activist methods, not a replacement. This is because activists were not fully convinced the Internet could replace the effectiveness of traditional methods of campaigning, and didn't feel their skills were advanced enough to rely on the Internet for their participation. As part of their campaign, Stop the Toad Foundation visited local schools to discuss the impact of cane toads in WA. This type of campaigning is independent of CMC, but the interviewee found that many of the schools had seen the group on the web:

I'd go out to schools and give presentations and a lot of them found out about us through Internet searches. The schools would find our contact number on our website and ring. The homepage is part of the presentation and the kids have already seen the website. (Participant G, September 6, 2006)

As a result it is apparent that CMC has the ability to facilitate and supplement the promotion of face-to-face interaction activities.

#### 4.7.1 Maintaining the Importance of The Mainstream Media

Following the introduction of the Internet, the environment within which activists operate has changed, affecting “what counts as community, collective identity, democratic space, and political strategy” (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003, p. 1). Electronic communication enables activists “to almost instantaneously transmit alternative media accounts and images of protests to contrast those of mainstream, corporate-owned media outlets” (Smith, 2000, p. 15). An individual can be both a sender *and* receiver, elaborating, creating and modifying information. This is not permitted in traditional channels of corporate and state media, which are still sometimes heavily relied upon. Reliance also creates considerable risk for activist groups, as Wolfsfeld points out:

The media often tend to exaggerate the weird and unusual about social movements in order to make them more newsworthy ... [because] the mass media are designed to cover events, not issues. As a result, it is difficult – if not impossible – to convey ideological messages via the press. (cited in L. Grunig, 1992, p. 510)

Most activists still seek to attract the attention of mainstream media, well aware of the influence and power the media has on the public, for better or for worse. More than 1000 protestors in Canada who tried to break down a concrete blockade received much more media attention than the 25,000 others who took to the streets peacefully. Regardless, activists “have often relied upon corporate and state media as a means of communicating with other section of society with all the attendant risks that this reliance brings” (Wright, 2004, p. 80). Gibson and Kelly (2000) agree that the ‘old’ media was important for publicity and although the Internet is an

important 'new' tool, activists' communication methods cannot rely solely upon the emerging communication networks. An optimal strategy would include, and rely upon, both computer-mediated communication and traditional tactics.

A vast majority of cyberactivists seek media exposure and coverage, which in turn may increase awareness, and "be crucial to influencing people's hearts and minds and, eventually, policy decisions" (Rucht, 2004, p. 29). CMC is unlikely to have the same effect as a damning headline in a national paper in forcing the government to react (Pickerill, 2003, p. 137). Participants in this research seemed to agree, as all believed the mass media was very powerful in influencing public opinion.

Although positive media attention can be beneficial, activists endure a bittersweet relationship with uncontrolled forms of media. Both activists and the mass media engage in a struggle to attract attention, yearn to maximise outreach, and are confronted (to varying degrees) with competitors. Social movements in the past sought to rely on both their own media and the established mass media, though to strikingly different degrees depending on the circumstances (Rucht, 2004). The Stop the Toad Foundation used independent channels to publicise their cause because of a lack of interest from the local media:

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Mainstream media, particularly in WA, is not that supportive of conservation issues and it's really hard to get your information into the mainstream media, so the Internet is a mainstream medium that you can use to get your message out there. We can't rely on print media, nor broadcast media to assist us getting the right message out, or the correct information even, so the Internet we know it's a tool we need to use. (Participant G, September 6, 2006)

The effectiveness of the Internet does replace, or devalue traditional mass media methods. Cyberactivists prefer to rely on their own methods of controlled information dissemination because the very nature of mass media cannot provide

any guarantee for coverage, be it in a positive or negative light. YCA found that dealing with traditional media proved to be difficult, so a stronger reliance on other organisation's e-mail networks to pass information was used. The media was only interested in the group when the issue was contentious (during the initial proposal). Corporations are in a more financially stable position than activist groups, allowing them to buy coverage at their convenience. This creates a slightly advantageous relationship with the media because these businesses can get controlled and guaranteed exposure.

It is arguable that a lack of knowledge about the media industry contributes to a lack of success cyberactivists encounter with journalists. Participant F admitted that their media liaison skills were inadequate, which may answer why Information for Action has only had one article printed about the organisation since its inception in 1999:

We've had minimal success with the media. I believe if anything is worthwhile, they'll find me. I know it's not a good philosophy to have when dealing with the media but so be it. I'm not a very good PR person, I'm better at conceptualising and organising, not communicating on a social level. (Participant F, September 12, 2006)

A careful understanding of the needs and rules of the mass media is required for any efforts to be noticed (Rucht, 2004). The YCA interviewee understood the way the media worked: "I have tried to get press releases up through *The West Australian* since and haven't had the penetration... like they've not wanted to pick up on the story. I can understand that in a way because for the media, nothing has happened as yet" (Participant E, September 14, 2006).

While media attention on activism fluctuates, groups can influence "this process not only by shaping and framing their public action but also by pursuing other means" (Rucht, 2004, p. 33). For example, they can build and maintain relationships

with journalists, provide accurate background information to journalists and they can provide media release and/or offer spokespeople. Activists may have the best intentions providing all of the above, but because the information they possess is not always what journalists or the public desperately seek, it can be difficult for them to get media exposure. Rucht (2004) suggests events like protest action remain the key activity to get media coverage. The participants in this research had varied understanding of news values - from no knowledge to very high. This was reflected in the amount of media exposure – with high levels of coverage from groups with sound knowledge of how the media works.

A constant attribute found in mass media is extreme selectivity. A problem of 'too much' information rather than 'not enough' exists for journalists. Although there are no universal, concrete guidelines for content selection, "the media generally follow some guidelines and rules that, according to communication theories, can be summarised under the heading of news values" (Rucht, 2004, p. 34).

Most researchers would agree that conflict, currency, prominence, proximity and direct impact can be considered just some variables of news values and news worthy style. There is no guarantee media coverage will be granted on the basis it concerns an activists group; groups "that take the principles of the media system into account are likely to get advantages relative to other groups who do not care about these principles" (Rucht, 2004, p. 36).

One interviewee said "unless it bleeds or it's controversial or suggestive of some conspiracy, or something juicy, they're not going to run it" (Participant E, September 14, 2006). News must contain news values. If activists do not understand even the basics of journalism, or the way the media works, they cannot attract media coverage.

# 5. Chapter Five: Discussion

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## 5.1 The Need for Evaluation

Evaluation is useful for identifying future objectives and strategies. Evaluation is vital for determining how effective a campaign has been and whether objectives were met. It is also useful for identifying future objectives and strategies; for example, with the organisation Information for Action used in this study, it was clear that the strategic objectives needed to be reevaluated. The website was designed as an online lobbying portal for users to send electronic petitions to respective delegates on issues they are concerned about, yet the IFA interviewee admitted that this form of petitioning was not the most effective:

I'm not convinced I made the right decision on making Information for Action an online lobbying site. It hasn't become the success story I hoped, but I'm still working on that. We have the structure but not the output. We get 300,000 hits a month, thousands of visitors a month but not too many e-mails sent unfortunately so we need to work on that. (Participant F, September 12, 2006)

Measurement is poorly conducted in the public relations sector (Canning, 2005). Organisations must set objectives otherwise there is nothing to measure, and there is no point setting objectives unless they will be measured. Evaluation of public relations efforts plays an integral role in demonstrating accountability and effectiveness, and organisational impact (Dozier, 1990; Fairchild, 2002; Radford & Goldstein, 2002). There is no single evaluation technique, in the same way there is no single PR objective. However, what is universal is the need for PR practitioners

(and activists) to link objectives to evaluation strategies. Increasingly, measurement and evaluation need to be more than anecdotal. Objective rigorous methods are required that deliver credible 'proof' of results to management, shareholders and key stakeholders (Tymson & Lazar, 1998).

None of the case-study groups had evaluation or 'return on investment' models in place. All focused on measuring outputs, not outcomes, to evaluate performance and effectiveness. Outputs are the materials and activities that are created as part of a PR strategy, such as media releases, or newsletters, or surveys. All interviewees confused their outputs as results: "Our online petition got a really good response. We had hundreds of people submitting their support on the issue so using the petition was quite an effective tool" (Participant G, September 6, 2006). Although the participant's petition as an output was effective, the interviewee could not identify, or quantify the effect on the outcome, as the government's stance on the issue has not changed.

The focus on evaluation is simply concerned with the numbers of participants, rather than the actual outcomes, a factor one interviewee did identify:

One of my concerns with online activism is that it's very difficult to measure the effectiveness. It begs the question if five million people know about something, does that necessarily mean that there's going to be any better pressure on something that will force change? Either way, how do you start to judge what worked? You often don't find out till way after the fact, but if you've got a phone tree that's got 400 people on it and four people turn up, you can measure if it's worked or not. Or is it a way of making yourself feel good and you've never really had to get out of your nice warm office and go and stick your arse on the line? (Participant A, September 11, 2006)

The inability of activist organisations to demonstrate evaluation methods in line with other third sector groups leaves the groups with a lesser chance of receiving grants and financial support from the government and other institutions, who



demand groups to be accountable for their spending and to see the results from their investment. Therefore, activist groups need to take measures to enhance evaluation practice. However, some interviewees argued they did not have the time to learn performance measures, or they believed it would be too expensive.

### **5.1.1 Understanding Publics**

Most participants really had no idea who their publics were, resulting in them making assumptions based on their own opinions. For example, Stop the Toad Foundation felt interactive features were beyond their membership base because of their age, so they did not include them. Cost, lack of budget and lack of time were presented as main reasons for market research and evaluation not being carried out in the case-study groups, yet NCTs do offer ways around this. For example, Information for Action argued the structure of the organisation (purely Internet-based) prevented access to information about their users, but this could be resolved by giving visitors an incentive to become members of the site, possibly adding a 'members only' section. This way, individuals could provide demographics and other important information to the group.

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### **5.1.2 Lack of Technical Skills**

The lack of training limited the extent to which features were included on the sites. Sophisticated coding, design and interactive tools were not found on any of the sites because the groups did not know how to use them. By ignoring savvy features such as using keywords for searches, clever lurking, logs and website statistics, activist groups limited their effectiveness on the web. Members had no "option" tools to tell the groups what they wanted or thought as most sites were designed as one-way information dissemination portals.

### 5.1.3 The Internet: A Tool for Communication

The Internet is a communication tool and although it is not a substitute for people, one participant believed it could be. Face-to-face interaction is a necessity for activism, much to the disappointment of those interviewed who believed they could be just as successful behind their monitors. While cyberactivism can be a useful way to cut down on overheads, it ideally should be a complementary tool to traditional methods, not a replacement, especially when it is used poorly.

### 5.1.4 Lack of Education

It would be ideal if activists gained exposure to public relations education as it would benefit them greatly. It is often said that organisations do not choose whether to do PR, they simply choose whether they do it *well*. There is a misconception that PR is the domain of corporate giants with large budgets. Yet, if used wisely, public relations can be a cost-effective method for activities such as gaining public attention, increasing membership levels and assisting in forming relationships with key stakeholders and so on. Groups may think education and training is too expensive, but having an experienced, educated activist with a background in PR will give any group an enormous advantage. Many of the significant problems activists face, including knowledge of the mass media and publics, could be resolved and overcome with an understanding of public relations. Ultimately, the cost of training an individual in public relations is a small investment compared to the results an organisation could achieve with a well thought out, strategic plan.

Activists are not the only ones who struggle to measure the effectiveness of their efforts - it has also been a long and enduring problem for PR practitioners. This is yet another reason why activists must not isolate themselves from the organisational practices of larger groups, since they have much to learn from the experiences of those in public relations.

## 6. Conclusion

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The rise of the networked world has shifted the social and political configurations of the twenty-first century, creating new ways of understanding power and change. From all parts of the world, activism and cyberactivism will increasingly contribute to shaping those changes. This thesis has offered a critical evaluation of the practice of cyberactivism within three activist groups. It has attempted to present an alternative theoretical perspective on activism within a public relations framework. Cyberactivism reflects the ability of activists to become an integral part in developing contemporary public relations practice. However, it is important to remember that these case-study groups are a small fraction of the overall activist movement and their reflections and opinions cannot be seen as representing the beliefs of the majority.

Critical research carried out for this thesis has served to challenge biases in dominant theory and practice, and consequently questions whose interests are satisfied in mainstream PR theory. Critical research has also offered an alternative approach to conducting public relations, exploring the operational and communicative needs and interests of activist organisations. This thesis has aimed to demonstrate there cannot be just one model of public relations practice.

This research confirms that new communication technologies like the Internet facilitate the communication tactics of activist groups. Mobilisation, writing letters and generating discussion are all possible in the physical world, but have been made more accessible and convenient by means of communication technology.

Public relations literature tends to be written from a commercial and state perspective of the profession, ignoring the more social role of PR, which is evident through the practice of activism. To suggest activists perform public relations functions is dismissed by many public relations researchers who have conventionally worked on delivering techniques to best conquer possibly damaging actions by activist stakeholders (Baillie, 2002).

Activism is commonly viewed as a separate force which offers nothing more than burden and challenges within a public relations context. Activists are often considered 'the enemy' of organisations and the public relations practitioner. Investigating the public relations efforts of activist organisations shifts the profession beyond the traditionally assigned functions of state and commerce, thus delivering a suitable contemporary perspective on the industry.

While cyberactivism is enhancing the ability to communicate, co-ordinate and carry out action, there remains plenty of potential to develop more innovative forms of interaction (Pickerill, 2003). The case-study groups preferred to use complementary, rather than mutually exclusive, forms of activism.

Cyberactivists' use of two-way communication is limited, with one-way methods being preferred. The need to evaluate the results of strategic objectives is deeply flawed within the activist groups examined, particularly objectives concerning Internet-based tactics such as online petitioning.

This research identified the changing definitions of activism in the wired and networked society and how these new definitions affect contemporary public relations. It considers why activism and public relations ignore the efforts of each other's constructive activities and attempts to explain the theoretical contexts that affect how activism and public relations are

practiced and perceived. As a result, this thesis has established that public relations literature does not deal adequately with activism and that activism does not deal comprehensively with the issue of public communication.

Communication approaches taken by activists when dealing with the media might be considered ineffective. Activists in this research have proven they do not know how to maximise media coverage because they do not understand news values and how the media works. All interviewees accepted that their understanding of evaluation methods were also inadequate, although there was no evidence to suggest participants were willing to change their evaluation techniques. Activist organisations must become more receptive to public relations efforts of commercial and state sectors to appreciate the need to evaluate and measure PR objectives.

Activists have a repertoire of communication methods available to them, but due to a lack of time and resources, are competent in only the bare minimum of CMC tactics. This lack of knowledge also fuels a misunderstanding of interactive communication, with all participants unaware of the power of interactive communication. They view the Internet as an additional tool, like a pamphlet or poster - using the tool for one-way information dissemination. Activists need to understand that the Internet differs from previous channels because it is the only one with sophisticated levels of interactive options. Groups are able to construct online communities which can enhance and build on existing face-to-face relationships but unfortunately all fail to do so.

Overall, the employment of online tactics by the case-study groups suggests that their use of cyberactivism constitutes an appendage to, rather than a fundamental shift in, their repertoire for action. Participants had simply transferred existing methods to the Internet and had not challenged their basic approaches to strategy.

Only by engaging with the fundamental concepts of strategic public relations practice will activists be able to fulfil their potential as agents of social change in a wired world.

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