



## **Evolution of Communication Formats and their Effects on Collective Action: The Impact of ICT**

*[Julia Delrieu](#), The Vision Think Tank*

### **SUMMARY**

The following backgrounder serves as a starting point for a research project involving Vision's interest in modern forms of participation and Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

Communication formats have greatly evolved over the last century. Each format brings about different ways of reacting to and shaping collective action. Nowadays, the State's political authority and ability to represent citizen interests is gradually eroded by transnational economic activities, confining the defense of collective interests to the social realm. Yet, communities are benefiting from an unprecedented opportunity to interact, exchange information and set up networks regardless of geographical distances, which is achieved by using the Internet and its range of different formats.

The following backgrounder suggests distinguishing civic collective actions from parochial collective actions and from there wishes to examine how both types of political communities perceive events and shape their response through popular communication formats. Some examples provide the guidelines for the next step of the research. It will involve gathering dissemination designed through ICT and made by the aforementioned communities (civic and parochial).

### **PROBLEM SETTING**

#### **Evolution of communication formats**

Communication mediums have undergone considerable transformations over the last century, to the extent that they affect our professional, personal and social behaviours. Over a long period of time, communication has evolved from being predominantly based on oral mediums to relying on verbal formats. The popularity of these mediums, as we will later see, are closely linked to our interaction with space and time.

However, one main element stands out when studying the current influence of communication formats on collective action. Internet and Internet related mediums

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(which we will refer to as Information and Communication Technology - ICT throughout this study) provide unprecedented communication opportunities. Whereas the telephone enables simultaneous exchange of information, and television broadcasts broaden audiences, the former cannot enable information archiving and referencing and the latter's communication model is based on a one-way communication process. ICT, on the other hand, provides a hybrid medium. Written and oral communications coincide in audiovisual mediums, thus allowing the same simultaneity as telephone and television, and furthermore providing the resources for keeping track of this communication activity.

Therefore ICT provides a medium offering simultaneous, permanent and interactional resources for communication. This setting appears to display elements that could be beneficial for collective action, and for the key role dissemination plays in achieving goals set by groups.

### **Evolution of globalization**

The concept of globalization refers to a wide array of notions, which will require that we establish our own definition, be it or not as comprehensive as the concept generally used. Our interest for the purpose of this study primarily rests on globalization's impact on the communication and sociological fields. Two main elements contribute to our understanding of globalization.

First, time and space as experienced in society are increasingly undergoing compression and acceleration. This has been documented and discussed since the late nineteenth century<sup>1</sup>. As industry and technology progress, space and time, as we experience them, are shifting, thus affecting our behaviours. Improving transportation facilities has deeply affected human mobility, which in turn greatly impacts one's notion of community and togetherness, in relatively similar ways as diaspora and small transnational communities have been experiencing. Communication technology enables immediate broadcasting and response through globally accessible mediums, accelerating information processing and utilization.

Individualization is the second main item with which we wish to equate our conceptual use of globalization, and which primarily refer to the empirical manifestation of individualism. Individualism has been gradually embodied in Western civilization through philosophy, spanning from Descartes' *ergo sum* to Sartre's existentialism, put in practice through political ideals with participatory models based on individual right to vote and civic practices, and finally diffused through media and cultural productions, whether through "high art" (Rodin's *Penseur*) or popular culture (Rocky's sequels glorifying a simple man setting out to fight and defend himself against improbable odds and superpowers).

In short, individualization is the result of our day-to-day assimilation of individualism, and tends to manifest itself through social atomization and consumption patterns that encourage individual consumption and action.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Adams' concept of "law of acceleration" in Adams, Henry (1931), *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Modern Library).



When juxtaposing both communication and sociological trends that make up our definition of globalization, it becomes clear that although globalization is commonly conceived of as a vector for standardization and, not so paradoxically, greater inequalities, it also favours individual access to the world. The increasing commonness of technology tools and increasingly user-friendly software and websites allow for unprecedented technology capital at an individual level:

At a minimum, a single farmer with an inexpensive PC, widely available software, and a low-cost Internet service provider can make a web page viewable by millions. If the farmer spends more, he can buy an electronic mailing list that allows him to send messages to thousands of potential contributors.<sup>2</sup>

In short, sources of communication are increasingly as broad as the audience able to access ICTs, since the audience is likelier to participate in information and communication emission and commentary processes.

### Evolution of Collective Action

How does the evolution of globalization and communication affect collective action? Before even discussing this point, an overview of the concept of collective action will enable us to identify its purpose and how this purpose affects its manifestations. Corlett considers that:

(...) collective action is caused by the beliefs and desires (wants) of the collective itself, whether or not such beliefs and desires can be accounted for or explained in individualistic terms.<sup>3</sup> (sic)

Although relatively broad, this conception of collective action is relatively similar to traditional participatory models such as Rousseau's *volonté générale*, and has the benefit of describing both civic duty patterns and political action that run parallel to formal national or supranational political frames. Yet little literature is devoted to studying the incentives and organizational strategies for collective action. As Melucci puts it:

... the *collective dimension* of social behaviour is taken as a given (...). How people actually manage acting together and becoming a "we" evades the problematic as it is taken for granted.<sup>4</sup>

Melucci's observation takes on a particular meaning as distances and time lapses are increasingly smaller and shorter. This tends to challenge more traditional models of

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<sup>2</sup> Gisela Sin & Arthur Lupia, "Which public goods are endangered?: How evolving communication technologies affect The logic of collective action", *Public Choice*, (2003:117), p.324.

<sup>3</sup> J. Angelo Corlett, "Collective Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, (2001:32), p.575.

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Melucci (1996) *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p.15.



kinship that organize social and political groups. As early as 1927, John Dewey foresaw a shift in associational models when he wrote:

Affections will continue as long as the heart beats. (...)But attachment requires something more than organic causes. (...) Acceleration of mobility disturbs them (attachements) at their root. And without abiding attachements associations are too shifting and shaken to permit a public readily to locate and identify itself.<sup>5</sup>

When juxtaposing the above findings about collective action and confronting them with the spread of accessible user-friendly technology to a continuously increasing audience, what type of collective action takes place?

First, an overview of ICT effects on institutionalized collective action such as national governing bodies will help understanding the motives behind more informal or privately-led collective action.

### **Information and politics: recognition versus monopoly of power through mediums**

Much has been said on the current civic defection in modern democracies: participation rates in elections are relatively high and the public opinion is known for its low interest in political current affairs. Vision, in previous studies, voiced its own take on the subject, and identified the legislative and parliamentary power decrease as one of the starting points of the crisis most democracies are going through. Furthermore, information also plays an important role in this crisis:

The value of democracy is – in Vision’s point of view - held in its superior ability to capture and **elaborate information** (on people’s expectations, on their ideas and ideologies, on their dreams and their needs, on the existing competencies and possible projects) and to transform them into political will.(...) The crisis that democracy is witnessing nowadays is determined – according to Vision – by the increasing quantity and complexity of “information” that institutional mechanisms, which have not changed for years, can no longer “process.”<sup>6</sup>

It is needless to say that knowledge is power, but how this knowledge is maintained entwined with power questions the bonds we entertain with information sources and production. As Foucault’s *discipline du savoir*<sup>7</sup> explains, knowledge production and sharing has been primarily organized and processed through institutions such as schools, universities and media, which are established and recognized as authorities on the matter.

These institutions are primarily bound by physical limits, mostly national and entrenched to a different extent by cultural and national bias. The mediums they use to

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<sup>5</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, Swallow Press, Ohio UP / New York, Henry Holt & Company, 1927, pp.140-141.

<sup>6</sup> The Vision Think Tank, *Back to Democracy*, May 2006, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault (1969) *Archéologie du Savoir*, Gallimard, Paris, 275 pages.



spread knowledge involve mostly a one-way communication process usually in the form of print, television and radio, which reveals the way those who have a certain monopoly on knowledge production and dissemination chose to share information. Innis and McLuhan<sup>8</sup> respectively identified that knowledge tends to be organized in a monopolistic way and that the medium says a lot about the limits put on the interpretation and the use of the message displayed.

Television, as a one-way communication process, favours an individual assessment and filtering of the available information. As much as it indirectly affects civic participation by broadening audiences through live broadcasts (to the extent where Eliseo Veron<sup>9</sup> spoke of “audiovisual democracies” when studying South American political practices), television also decreases incentives for collective action, as widespread and individual access to media disadvantages settings for collective action. The written press has to compete with television for its readership and, in the same way as television, it is confronted with market competitiveness and ownership pressures. The medium of radio has often been threatened by technological progress, yet still enjoys relative popularity and is often considered as a medium for local collective action (especially for dissident collective action). Yet all three provide lesser coverage and depth of analysis for subjects that are prone to be used for the purpose of collective action, as they all tend to devote more and more air time to entertainment.

Can ICT make up for this crisis in information processing and dissemination? If so, the Internet’s boundless medium could find a much broader audience and could provide a format favouring mass collaboration and organization. It can also be argued that it is the increasing complexity of information that is partly to blame. Yet the same electronic resources might provide the solution if the “peoples” (ie the electoral bodies and the civil societies) can find strategies to aggregate individual perspectives and organize them into fairly cohesive collective behaviours and actions.

All three types of “one-way communication” mediums do not however provide sufficient platforms and resources to generate a truly “reflexive” communication process as efficient as ICT. Furthermore, platforms for collective action such unions, associations and churches are still quite popular and effective.

Yet, technically speaking, ICT provides not only individualized technology capital that favors participation but also provides platforms for individual expression, widening the scope for political opinions that increasingly evade more traditional channels of collective behavior and action such as associations, universities and unions. All in all, reaction to disseminated knowledge tends nowadays to consist of an aggregate of opinions built upon increasingly different sophistication patterns. These patterns expand as sources of information and knowledge production multiply, thus making more complex any survey process set to understand how information is perceived and in turn used for political or collective purposes.

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<sup>8</sup> See Marshall McLuhan (1964), *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill) and Harold Adams Innis (1999) *The Bias of Communication*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 226 pages.

<sup>9</sup> See Eliseo Véron, “La Comunicacion mediatica”, *Dialogos de la comunicacion*, 1997



...globalisation and technology imply discontinuity along the entire path of forming and implementing political wills. (...) In a sense "institutions" disintegrate and individuals increasingly self govern themselves blurring the boundaries between "participation" and "government".<sup>10</sup>

Yet it is possible to broadly distinguish two types of collective behavior and actions based on more familiar lines of dissent and beyond the physical boundaries of the States. In this backgrounder, we will borrow from Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld*<sup>11</sup> where two main types of communities reflect distinct interpretations of modernity.

On one hand the "McWorld" stands for mainly ultra liberal economic and political agents whose actions tend to be detrimental to local political representation and action, and on the other, "Jihad" designates political agents that wish to perpetuate a parochial and conservative vision of communities, thus also posing a threat to democracy. Both terms are somewhat misleading, as one tends to picture two geographically bound entities. Yet both tendencies coexist within countries, and their line of conflict is more about cornering and promoting their understanding of modernity, whether they adhere or not to the latter.

Nonetheless, Barber's theory provides an interesting theoretical framework for organizing the study of collective action.

In this backgrounder we will consider that two main groups or agents use the mediums provided by evolving technologies. On one hand **civic agents (or communities)** designate information producers and disseminators that are primarily interested in questioning social and political involvement for constructive purposes. On the other hand, we will designate by the concept of **parochial the agents (or communities)** who primarily tend to react against an established order through seemingly anti-modern behaviour, whether the latter is political or religious. Furthermore the latter type of group tends to sustain a founding myth and tradition as the community's cornerstone.

These two categories are not necessarily physically bound to a territory, but rather built upon values that are shared regardless of the community members' location. For instance, fundamentalist organizations based on religious beliefs, whether they are Christian or Muslim, are most likely to share the same understanding of the purpose of tradition<sup>12</sup> and all members of their respective congregation do not necessarily communicate through shared physical settings such as a church or a mosque. Furthermore, the same communities might not have the same dissemination and enrolment strategies. Likewise, at the level of media production and its relation with political power, *Radio Free Europe* is likely to have more in common with *Democracy Now!*, but their audiences might not necessarily share the same perspective, set of values or even belong to the same country.

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<sup>10</sup> Vision The Think Tank, *Back to Democracy*, May 2006, p.9.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin R.Barber "Jihad vs. McWorld", *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Our understanding of transition for this backgrounder was borrowed from Martha Blache, whos see tradition as a "mechanism of selection, and even of invention, projected toward the past in order to legitimise the present" in "Folclor y cultura popular", *Revista de Investigaciones Folcloricas* 3, December (University of Buenos Aires, Instituto de Ciencias Antropologicas, 1988), p.27



Both types of agents, whether they broadcast or set-up demonstrations, do share the same goal: responding to the political or moral shortages generated by local, regional or international political and social settings.

In non-democratic ruling bodies, collective action takes on a particular meaning as means to express popular discontent and frustrations lack a public space to do so.

Civic communities mostly face challenges pertaining to democratic or political shortcomings such as lack of interest in local or national politics, insufficient or inappropriate media coverage of events and low partisan identification. Parochial communities generally strive to provide answers to their members' frustrations arising from these communities generally being marginalized or misinterpreted by media productions and international or national political realms. Furthermore, both types of agents consciously act, react and produce dissemination knowing that at all times their productions, and therefore their collective actions can benefit from widespread broadcasting, helped by individual access to a powerful technology capital.

How does this affect collective action and its representation? What impact do ICTs have on media productions and political sophistication? Do ICTs really serve collective action?

## PROBLEM SOLVING

The questions identified above serve both for civic and parochial communities, and each type of community will be further explored through a theoretical framework that will act as a starting point for the verification process. The latter will be based mostly on qualitative research involving a process of discourse identification. By using a media literacy approach to "read" productions made by both types of communities, the idea is to identify the audience or audiences these productions target, and how the medium chosen for the dissemination process conveys the message.

But first, we would like to confront both types of communities to the frameworks we identified as potential guidelines for the rest of the study.

Hannah Arendt's work on citizenship and the public sphere<sup>13</sup> is a good starting point for confronting our findings on civic communities to an "ideal" of participation and citizen involvement. According to Arendt, an effective public sphere in a democratic environment encompasses both a common world, shared by actors involved in civic activities, and spaces of appearance allowing individuals to express and manifest social behaviors pertaining to collective action, such as the reciprocity emerged from sharing a common world and equality set by democratic standards.

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<sup>13</sup> Maurizio Passerin d'Entrevès, *Hannah Arendt*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, first published 27/07/06, available on <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/#AreConCit>, last visited: 22/06/07



Globalization's progress and growing individualized access to ICT certainly do favor Arendt's conception of a public sphere. Communities are faced more and more with the same type of challenges as globalization tends to standardize economic processes and cultural trends. Growing popularity of individual technological platforms certainly also favors the emergence of spaces of appearances such as blogs which provide platforms for expression. Furthermore, networking websites allows one to display their identity to an extremely broad audience. Yet Arendt also insists on the spatial dimension of civic collection action and behavior. Can ICT provide a substitute for the physical settings that traditionally define the public sphere, or do these technologies act as placebos, providing the illusion of togetherness?

Furthermore, much can be argued about identity making, and more specifically identity forging issues arising from unsupervised activity made possible through evolving technologies. The latter is becoming very noticeable as, for instance, increasing amounts of money scams get sent to e-mail accounts, always written by untraceable individuals. Such type of identity and participation related issues are much less likely to occur within traditional public spaces as the State's monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force and repression minimises such occurrences. But who or what can act as a similar type of safeguard on mediums accessible through evolving technologies? For the time being, such type of monitoring can mostly be done only by the owner of the medium - may it be the ICT supported mediums.

Nonetheless, individual access to evolving technology capital has the potential to generate individual behavior prone to collective action, as demonstrated by the popularity of citizen journalism and the spontaneous formation of smart mobs. Yet, when we confront these phenomena with Melucci's definition of collective action, do they translate into a lasting "we", into a group that continues to act collectively, and therefore can become structured, can agree upon an agenda? They certainly provide information very quickly, but how can one monitor the information's accuracy, and therefore claim the authority required for effective action? In this instance, spontaneous reaction to information does not necessarily inform citizens in ways that can compensate the political shortages witnessed within democratic societies.

The use of ICT for collective action by parochial communities provides interesting insights even for individuals that do not belong to these communities. Furthermore, the ever-growing potential audience that can access these productions is quite unprecedented. The use of new mediums in these instances pertain more to the logic of marketing, as these communities strive to rally or convince their audiences. For instance, some Christian movements that congregate at megachurches display spectacular audiovisual facilities in impressively big churches, and the strategic dramatization provides the means to impress and convince audiences. The sense of togetherness is furthermore enhanced outside of services through electronic dissemination (videos, newsletters, etc). As Thumma puts it:

This knowledge distribution is essential for the functioning of the organization. This use of a church's media resources, however, extends far beyond information management. Newspapers, magazines, weekly bulletins, pamphlets, video presentations and taped messages create traditions even as their stories inform members of church history or current



events. With the use of slick desktop publishing programs these media are colorful, attractive, and quite professional looking.<sup>14</sup>

The purpose and format of the dissemination of these churches says a lot about their audiences' needs and collective behavior. These productions serve the purpose of constructing a tradition, strengthening a sense of togetherness in spite of the congregation's size, and thus help maintain incentives for collective behavior and action in favour of religious beliefs. In these instances, ICT positively enhances the incentives to act collectively, but they complement a "physical" network that was already connecting people. In short, tools created by modernity serve the creation and expansion of collective behaviour and actions founded on tradition.

Similarly, the increased access to individual technology capital affects secular institutions such as the army. The war in Iraq and the controversy that it generated also saw a boom in what has been dubbed as Milblogs, blogs written by soldiers on the frontline or back at home. Mostly strongly influenced by patriotism, these blogs provide unofficial support to state-driven collective actions and decisions. Dissident milblogs do exist, but they are quite a minority group with no significant ties compared to the syndications set up on most "pro-war" Milblogs. The most significant fact that stands out from this multiplication of Milblogs is the unprecedented information dissemination, an unfamiliar situation for an institution as impervious as the military.

In a much more dramatic way, videos from suicide bombers serve the purpose of strengthening ties within parochial communities by witnessing another's dedication. But these videos have yet another audience, as they also seek authority through threat on the physically and symbolically targeted audiences. This type of media production serves a double purpose: to galvanize incentives for collective action and honour the community while raising awareness about one's cause. In this instance, collective action bypasses conventional channels of action and banks primarily on media coverage for a maximised impact.

Even if the contents and the outcome in all examples above are quite different, all types of dissemination from parochial communities share the same goal: satisfying their communities by building discourses and providing opportunities for collective behaviour and action, adding material to nurture their traditions, and raising awareness about their belief system. In all cases, evolving technologies were strategic tools for adapting collective action to the scope of the ever-increasing audience provided by individualised access to technology.

The use of ICT by civic communities is often not as efficient as when used by parochial communities, as the incentives to aggregate individual wills for the higher purpose of collective action tend to be less persuasive. This is partly explained by the resilient dimension of collective action primarily designed to react against an established order.

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<sup>14</sup> Scott Thumma. *Exploring the Megachurch phenomena: Their characteristics and cultural context*, Hartford Institute for Religious Research, source: [http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma\\_article2.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2.html), last visited: 23/06/07



## CONCLUSION

This backgrounder serves as a starting point for further work on the impact of ICT on collective action. Both civic and parochial agents fully understand the potential that comes with an individual access to a capital of technology, and although this technology does not directly improve resources available to collective action in ways one would imagine (improvement of group cohesion), collective action that somewhat relies on a physical setting has greater chances to fully take advantage of the ICT potential. This, so far, is quite obvious when observing parochial type of collective action, but will democratic ruling bodies be able to take advantage of ICT in order to prevent the shortcomings observed in most democratic regimes? Will civic communities find a way to form an effective electronic civil society that could counter the media productions of parochial communities? A critical study of materials produced by both type of communities will enable to verify both the validity of the premisses and hypothesis developed throughout this backgrounder.

Interested in providing your own perspective, or adding to this research project?  
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