The ‘alter-globalization movement’ and the Internet: A case study of communication networks and collective action


Abstract

Based on an ‘organization as ideology’ emphasizing diversity, inclusiveness, and direct participation, the ‘movement for alternative globalization’ is thought to be organized in a decentralized and non-hierarchical way that respects these ideals. The use of new communication technologies is considered to play an integral role within this diverse and horizontal organizing model. Focusing on the use of email lists in the organizing process of the London 2004 European Social Forum, this paper attempts to explore the above claims. A closer inspection of the place of email lists in the processes of division of labour, decision-making, and accountability revealed that while email lists tend to render the organizing system more open, flexible, and decentralized, they also tend to conceal the elements that disturb this image by making them more informal and less explicit.

The ‘movement for alternative globalization’

The ‘movement for alternative globalization’ burst into the public consciousness in Seattle in late 1999. Since then it has been at the centre of much attention and controversy as it manages to unite diverse and often disparate groups and organizations under its broad and flexible frame of ‘alternative globalization’. According to della Porta, what helped this movement in dealing with its heterogeneous bases is ‘the identity shift from single-movement identity to multiple, tolerant identities’ (2005: 186). These ‘are characterized by inclusiveness and positive emphasis upon diversity and cross-fertilization, with limited identification. They develop especially around common campaigns on objects perceived as “concrete” and nurtured by an “evangelical” search for dialogue’ (Ibid).
This emphasis on inclusiveness and diversity is in turn reflected and accommodated by a loose and non-hierarchical mode of organizing. In that respect, the movement is considered to operate as a 'network of networks' constituting a prime example of 'leaderless resistance', as it manages to co-ordinate protests and events without central command or a common programme (Castells 2001: 142). Membership to the movement is not based on a formal process of affiliation. Instead, groups and individuals can easily link or drop out of the network 'without experiencing the kinds of ideological, membership, or identity stress that most social movement theories would suggest' (Bennett 2005: 215). The limited demands on commitment, as well as the absence of central leadership create an organizing structure that allows 'different political perspectives to coexist without the conflicts that such differences might create in more centralized coalitions' (Bennett 2004: 134).

However, this diverse and inclusive mode of organizing does not simply represent a practical necessity, but has come to acquire the status of a meta-ideology. As Bennett argues, underlying this organizational model is something that 'might be termed “organization as ideology”': a movement design code that (...) has emerged from at least three sources: reflection about past movement organization problems; resistance on the part of many younger generation activists to ideologies and collective identity requirements; and necessity born of the desire to form sustainable relationships with distant others' (2005: 217). The idea of 'organization as ideology' is a powerful one as it highlights the link between organizing and collective identity. As Clemens puts it, '[t]he answer to “Who are we?” need not be a quality or a noun; “We are people who do these sorts of things in this particular way” can be equally compelling' (Clemens 1996: 211). In other words, a model of organizing can be adopted for ideological reasons (because, for instance, it connotes openness and cooperation) and serve as a practical demonstration and symbol of this ideology (Polletta 2002: 5).

A case in point is the World Social Forum (WSF), one of the most high-profile events of the movement organized annually since 2001. According to its Charter of Principles, the WSF is ‘an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences, and interlinking for effective action’ (World Social Forum Organizing Committee 2001). The Charter also stresses that the WSF cannot make decisions as body and therefore no-one can be authorized ‘to
express positions claiming to be those of all its participants’ (Ibid). Thus, the Charter of Principles defines the ideal of the social forum mostly in organizational terms, describing it as an open space of deliberation that should not constitute a locus of power. The success of the WSF has spurned a number of regional and local social fora, with the European Social Forum (ESF) that this paper will be focusing on, being one of the most well-known.

**The internet & decentralization**

This diverse and loose organizational model is thought to be facilitated and afforded by the use of new communication technologies that enable activists to exchange information and coordinate actions across geographical and ideological divides, reducing the ‘costs of brokerage that are ordinarily attributed to the expansion of movement coalitions’ (Bennett 2003: 24). According to Bennett, however, ‘[e]ven more important for explaining the flexibility, diversity, and scale of this activism is the way in which the preferences for leaderless and inclusive networks is suited to the distributed and multidirectional capabilities of Internet communication. Communication within many of the organizations in these networks also reflects a similar decentralized, distributed model’ (Ibid). In other words, within this vein of inquiry, the Internet is considered not only as a new form of communication, but also as an organizational process in itself that is affecting the internal structure of the movement (Tarrow 2002: 15). As Tarrow notes, the internet seems ‘to constitute a social network (which is) remarkably similar to the reticular structure of social movements’, so that ‘it is only a short step to regarding the Internet itself as a form of organization’ (Ibid).

However, empirical evidence on the connection between organizing structure and the use of new communication technologies is quite scarce. This partly reflects the lack of research in the internal processes of social movements. As Polletta argues, ‘sociologists have paid significantly little attention to the processes that take place within social movement organizations. Decisionmaking is an obvious one. (...) Our failure to tackle these questions reflects our inclination to see organizations as actors rather than as made up of actors and their interactions. But it also reflects a tendency to substitute a classically rational calculus for empirical analysis of actual deliberative processes.’ (2002: 225). What is more, accounts of organizing and decision-making tend to lack a more in-depth reflection into the role of communication and communication media, even
though all of these processes are essentially communicative. And when the internet is indeed taken into account, then there is a tendency to examine the online as a distinct context from offline communication. This neglects the fact that social relationships are constituted through various media and forms of communication. As Bennett notes, ‘the most important theoretical move we can make in trying to understand the transnational social justice movement is to move beyond the distinction between on- and offline relationships. Technology is often aimed at getting people together offline, and one purpose of offline associations is often to clarify and motivate online relations’ (2005: 217).

My doctoral research is an attempt to address this gap by examining the use of the internet and particularly email lists in the processes of mobilization, organization and collective identity formation associated with the European Social Forum. The part I will be focusing on in this paper concerns the use of email lists in the organizing process of the London 2004 ESF. More specifically, I will attempt to explore the place of email lists in the process of division of labour and the functioning of the working groups. I will also examine the process of decision-making and the connection between email lists, transparency, and accountability. Keeping in mind that for this movement the mode of organizing constitutes something of a meta-ideology, I will then try to reflect on the role of email lists in the effort of realizing the ideal of the social forum as an open, decentralized, and diverse space.

The data derives from in-depth interviews with 24 activists that were involved in the organizing process of the London 2004 ESF. Two thirds of the interviewees were British-based, as this is where the day-to-day organizing work was taking place, while one third came from different European countries (Italy, France, Spain, Greece, Hungary). The sample included activists from different ideological traditions, trying to capture the diversity of opinions present in the ‘alter-globalization movement’. The minutes of important meetings were also used in order to shed additional light on the organizing mechanisms of the ESF.

**Division of Labour & Leadership**

The organizing process of ESF consists of a series of European Assembly (EPA) meetings, open to any group, organization or activist interested in the forum provided
that they agree with the Charter of Principles. The EPA constitutes the highest decision-making body of the ESF process to which all of the other organizing bodies, such as the national assembly or coordinating committee of the host country or the ESF working groups, are answerable. The working groups reflect the more general areas of organizing that need to be addressed and thus constitute the first and most basic level of division of labour. Working groups can be either European or refer solely to the level of the host country. Within the London 2004 ESF organizing process the four major working groups were: Programme, Practicalities, Culture, and Outreach. However, it is worth noting here that a number of temporary working groups were added to this structure later on in the process.

The minutes of the European Preparatory Assemblies, as well as the British National Assembly, reveal that in the overwhelming majority of cases working groups are founded in the offline meetings and that their establishment is almost always accompanied by the setting up of an email list devoted to the group. For instance, the minutes of the first meeting of the Practicalities working group noted that: ‘We collected everybody's email which is to be put on a practicalities mailing list which was set up by the Paris group last year. (...) The list will be open and public, and only to discuss practicalities.’ (Bat 2003).

The email list of the working group serves a twofold function. Firstly, it defines a space where the working group can exist independently of the physical meetings, granting the organizing structure with a degree of continuity and coherence in-between meetings and across large geographical distances. To an extent, the notion of email lists as a more constant space was also reflected in some of the interviews, with an activist from ATTAC Britain noting, for instance, that ‘email lists are like a permanent space outside mainstream society’ (Kotkowska, Personal Interview, 2004). In addition, the ease of setting up an email list renders the process of dividing labor and allocating responsibilities much more flexible. This means that the organizing structure of the movement is free to sprawl into different directions, spurning new task-related working groups easily and at no extra cost when the need arises. As one of my interviewees put it: ‘it’s like creating this space where things get discussed and then this space keeps shifting and moving and getting divided in different rooms’ (Ruiz, Personal Interview, 2004). This further encourages the segmentary nature of the movement, as working groups, each one responsible for specific tasks, tend to proliferate.
Secondly, the email list identifies, at any point in time, the membership of the group as subscription to the list ensures automatic membership. This means that commitment to the activities of the group is not a pre-requisite for affiliation. Instead, commitment is built through direct participation in the offline meetings of the group, whereby activists take on more responsibilities and become more closely entangled with the rest of the members. In other words, email lists allow participants to manage their degree of involvement to the group according to their own time or needs. In that respect, activists can be loosely connected to the working group by subscribing to its email list and following its activities without the need of attending the offline meetings. They can then choose to increase their involvement by participating in the face-to-face meetings and undertaking more responsibilities. As one of my interviewees put it, ‘one of the great advantages of email lists that when, I mean it depends on people being relatively scrupulous in putting stuff on, circulating stuff quite regularly but when people do that, it’s, it’s really good in as much as it allows you to sort of dip in, follow what’s going on, decide whether you want to go to a meeting’ (Callinicos, Personal Interview, 2005).

This eliminates the need for a more formal and hierarchical process of allocating tasks and responsibilities, as activists can voluntarily become part of a working group without the need for a higher authority regulating this process. In addition, since the email list defines the membership of the working group at any point in time, the organizing process can do without official lists of participants. Again, this allows working groups a degree of flexibility as their membership is not written in stone but can shift and change as activists subscribe and unsubscribe from the list.

It is worth noting, however, that even though entry or exit from the email list is not formally regulated informal restrictions to participation are always in operation. Apart from the obvious barriers concerning time and technological skills, additional barriers to entry refer to the difficulty of learning about the existence of these lists and of the ways in which someone can subscribe. This is particularly the case for activists unable to attend the offline meetings where the working groups are set up. These activists can of course join the list later on, provided that they have the requisite information about how and where to subscribe. Yet, in the case of the London ESF organizing process, this information was not made available through the official website, meaning that
newcomers would have to obtain this information mainly through their own networks or personal contacts.

While this inevitably puts a question mark on the openness and accessibility of the ESF process, it is not an altogether negative point. This is because, according to my interviewees, email lists devoted to organising tend to function in a more efficient way when they are smaller in size and when they correspond to a physical structure with the members of the list also meeting face-to-face. In this respect, barriers to entry can be viewed as an informal screening process that favours activists who attend the offline meetings and can thus become part of the physical structure of the group. It also favours activists already involved in some of the ESF networks which provides some guarantee of their trustworthiness or at least a record of past behaviour.

Email lists as a source of power and leadership
While the ‘movement for alternative globalization’ does not embrace the idea of spokespersons, as there is no central leadership and no one can claim to speak for the movement, spokespersons for specific issues or working groups can emerge spontaneously from the email lists. For working groups in particular, the activists assigned to answer the emails on behalf of the group can find themselves in leadership positions as they assume the responsibility of speaking for the group. This responsibility may extend from online to offline activities, with the ‘email spokespersons’ becoming the general spokespersons of the working group. One of my interviewees who acted as a contact person for the Programme Working Group explained how this process unfolded:

‘anyway I got dragged into the Programme group, partly, I went to a few meetings and then, I mean the way these things happen is kind of instructive, ‘cause I’ve followed the process previously I kind of knew the way it would go which was the, I mean there was a meeting and we were talking about the structure, the working structure of the programme and initially, I mean someone suggested, I can’t believe it, how about Jonathan Neale, Sarah Colborne and myself be the email, people who answer the emails for the programme group (…) and so I sort of said ‘yes, I would like to be involved in that’ (…) and I knew it would pan out the way it did because from that initial ‘yes, we’re going to temporarily just answer the emails’, you know, it then became the people who answer the emails, it then became contacts for the programme group, we then, I mean as it escalated, it became ‘well, who’s gonna do the timetabling?’; ‘well how about the
three of us take responsibility for the timetabling (...)’ which was basically how it developed, I mean out of that initial three people volunteering answering some emails’ (Reyes, Personal Interview, 2004).

The rise of activists responsible for answering the emails to the position of spokesperson is hardly surprising if we take into account that in-between physical meetings communication takes place extensively through email. Therefore, being the face of the working group in its email communication can be the source of considerable power. Clearly, the informal character of this process raises some questions concerning its democratic nature. The problem here does not necessarily lie on the way with which tasks are allocated to specific people or even with the fact that certain tasks seem to confer more power than others. It is rather the informal element of the process which may limit the transparency and accountability of the organizing structures created in this way. In other words, acknowledging the power of spokespeople and understanding the process through which they emerge may provide some ideas about how to make this process more democratic, through, for instance, the rotation of activists in such key positions.

Activists can also install themselves in positions of leadership through speaking not only for the group but also to the group. In other words, they can attempt to control the communication on the email list, turning it from a space of interaction, where information and ideas are exchanged laterally among the participants, to a broadcasting space, where information is transmitted from a centre to the rest of the group with limited scope for feedback or response.

The email list of the British Programme Working Group constituted an example of this practice. After the initial resistance of certain members to set up an email list, since they claimed that open email lists often get abused by their participants, the list that was finally set up was used in a very formal, one-sided way, mainly for circulating announcements or the minutes of meetings. What is more, these statements and minutes tended to be circulated by specific activists who in that way seemed to have seized control of the email space. As one of my interviewees noted, ‘now the programme working group, you know, started a list, which started unofficially almost… there were all these discussions, one person holding control of all the emails and communicating you
know like a broadcast from one email address’ (Ruiz, Personal Interview, 2004). Nevertheless, a point for consideration here is whether and to what extent ‘broadcasters’ can maintain control of the communication process in an application that is more suitable for lateral rather than hierarchical communication.

But even though email lists can potentially constitute sources of power and leadership, this power refers to the particular list or working group and not to the whole movement. This is because with new email lists cropping up easily and at very low cost it is very difficult to keep a tag on every working group and to compile a definitive list of their members and participants. Instead, and as it was mentioned earlier, email lists tend to enhance the flexibility and adaptability of the movement by enabling the organising structure to grow and shift towards new directions in response to emerging needs. This makes it almost impossible to establish a central control of this process and to concentrate power in the hands of the few. Email lists thus tend to facilitate the polycentric character of the movement as they do not support long-term, unitary and centralized leadership.

**Decision-making Online & Offline**

As the minutes of the face-to-face meetings reveal, all of the major decisions concerning the ESF organizing process are taken in the EPAs or the offline meetings of the national coordination and working groups. For a movement organising an event on a European scale, having a process of decision-making based on face-to-face meetings seems strangely ineffective. It is, however, explicable if we take into account the views and opinions expressed in the in-depth interviews.

In that respect, and according to most of my interviewees, online decision-making is more tiresome and time-consuming. This is particularly the case for complex decisions which involve difficult negotiations between many parties. As one of my interviewees put it, ‘I think it’s a very inefficient way (decisions through email) because OK someone puts a proposal, someone puts a counter-proposal, someone puts a counter proposal, you have to put a counter-proposal to that counter-proposal, it’s not a useful way, it’s not a good way of coming to consensus decisions or compromises, if you’re in a room communication is multi-faceted at any one time, you know what I mean? The dynamics are complex and because the dynamics in a room are much more complex, they lead to
resolution much quick, much more quickly, so I think the resolution is much more nuanced and much more sophisticated than through email’ (Nineham, Personal Interview, 2004). This is why most of my interviewees remarked that email lists can be used to make decisions only for very minor issues, while such decision-making is even more effective when activists already know each other through common work. 

Face-to-face communication is more suited for decision-making also for reasons having to do with civility, as most of my interviewees felt that activists tend to be more confrontational and uncivil online rather than offline. In fact, this is one of the main reasons why most of them avoid email lists for political discussion. One of them noted, for instance, that ‘when you’re on your own with other people, interacting with them, that, that imposes a certain minimum of civility, I’m not saying that that minimum can’t be breached, but it, you know, I have a policy when I’m angry never to write anything until I calm down or certainly never to send anything until I come down, but you know clearly for lots of people, lots of people kind of feel less constrained about being confrontational when using email (...) but for a meeting to function, for decision-making to function I think in general there must be a minimum of civility, which I think when you’re in physical proximity to other people, it’s easier to, em, easier to sustain’ (Calinicos, Personal Interview, 2005).

Some of my interviewees also questioned the democratic character of online decision-making. For instance, an activist from the SWP and Globalise Resistance noted that ‘(online) you don’t know who’s listening you don’t know how democratic you’re being, when you send out an email, even if it’s a group email, you send out an email, you don’t know how many people have read it, at what point do you decide “OK, we have enough answers to come back to make a decision”’ (Nineham, Personal Interview, 2004). Another one concurred: ‘the decisions should be taken by all of us in assembly, all of us together, not through the internet’ (Endre, Personal Interview, 2005).

However, this raises some interesting questions concerning the issue of democracy and inclusiveness: Why is it more democratic to exclude from the decision-making a person who has missed a meeting, rather than a person who has a missed an email? And also, to what extent can ‘all of us together’ take decisions offline when face-to-face meetings are not accessible to everyone? Indeed, as many of my interviewees noted, open
meetings are not necessarily inclusive. As one of them put it: ‘the European Assembly
meetings are accessible to on the whole to a set of political cast (…)who are relatively
time-rich for this process, like have a certain amount of time they can dedicate and also
be dedicated to the process, which is clearly not everyone’ (Reyes, Personal Interview,
2004).

Therefore, the degree to which a decision-making system based on offline meetings is
considered democratic depends on your understanding of democracy and inclusiveness.
Or, to put it rather more accurately, it depends on your opinion of who you can more
justifiably exclude. In that respect, opting to exclude the people who cannot attend the
offline meetings instead of those who can makes sense for several reasons. Firstly, it
locates decision-making within a face-to-face context that is better suited for complex
decisions and for arriving at agreements. Secondly, offline meetings are necessary for
the development of relationships of trust that require face-to-face communication in
order to thrive. However, problems start to arise once we begin to attach notions of
democratic legitimacy to a choice that was not made on that basis. In other words,
characterizing as more democratic a decision-making process that was ultimately
chosen for reasons of effectiveness, civility and trust-building is a false and potentially
dangerous claim. Dangerous because it makes it more difficult not only to fight the
unavoidable exclusions of this process, but also to alter and adapt it once the conditions
that made it flourish change.

It also worth noting here that people with an experience of online decision-making had
understandably a more open attitude towards its benefits, noting that it can be a very
transparent and organized way of taking decisions (Ruiz, Personal Interview, 2004).
However, for activists who were not familiar with internet decision-making, proposals to
hold meetings online seemed far-fetched and inapplicable. For instance, commenting on
his discussions with trade unionists about these issues, an Indymedia activist observed
that online decision-making was for them ‘totally inconceivable, as if I was talking about
Mars’ (Ibid).

A further point that needs to be highlighted here is that the suitability of the internet for
decision-making varies from application to application. In that respect, applications
facilitating real-time communication, such as chat, are better suited to decision-making,
as they allow for complex negotiations to take place more quickly and efficiently than email and email lists.

Informal Representation & Email Lists

Even though the offline meetings constitute the main locus of decision-making, email lists have a complementary role in this process as they are considered indispensable for preparing the face-to-face meetings. As one of my interviewees noted: ‘a meeting prepared by email and internet is the best meeting you’ll get’ (Becker, Personal Interview, 2004). Most of the comments focused on the value of email lists as a tool for receiving and disseminating information about organizing issues. In the words of an activist from Hungary: ‘the internet is good for tasks of information immediate and concrete, information about meetings, projects, mobilizations’ (Endre, Personal Interview 2004).

However, apart from strictly practical, the value of email lists was also democratic, as they helped to distribute power more equally by facilitating the ‘opening up’ of the offline meetings to a variety of actors. First of all, email lists helped to lower the costs of attending the face-to-face meetings as they were used to organize the transport and accommodation of activists, as well as the collection and distribution of the solidarity fund, put together to support the travel costs of activists from poorer countries. In addition, email lists were the main space for the announcement of meetings, helping to distribute this information as quickly and widely as possible. They were further used to deliberate on the most suitable time and place of meetings that would ensure broad and wide participation.

What is more, email lists provided the opportunity to activists unable to attend the face-to-face meetings to influence the offline decision-making process with varying degrees of success. In other words, email lists were a vital component of an informal system of representation whereby activists participating in the meetings acted as the unofficial representatives of their absent counterparts. In that respect, email lists were utilized for the circulation of the agenda prior to the face-to-face meetings, allowing activists to consult with those aiming to attend in order to make their ideas and opinions heard. The email lists were also used to contest the agenda of meetings, as well as the process through which it was set up and to demand for alterations or for new items to be
inserted. The lists were also used, albeit in a limited way, to co-write and circulate proposals and statements that would be presented as position papers in the face-to-face meetings, giving the opportunity to activists absent from the meeting to indirectly shape the decisions taken face-to-face. Another way in which activists could make their opinions heard was through online consultations, even though email lists were employed for this activity only informally and unofficially. Finally, email lists were used to circulate the official minutes of meetings, as well as unofficial reports and testimonies. Activists could thus contest and correct the official minutes, both in terms of their accuracy and of the actual decisions that were taken. The prompt circulation of the official minutes, as well as of the announcements of meetings and their agendas further became a yardstick of the transparency and democratic legitimacy of the decision-making process. In other words, email lists were embroiled in the transparency debates not only practically, being the main spaces for the circulation of this information, but also symbolically, constituting a measure of democracy and effectiveness and the basis for accusations and demands for a greater transparency.

Email, Transparency & Accountability

Email possesses a combination of characteristics that make it particularly apt for enhancing transparency. Firstly, email constitutes a written form of communication, which means that online discussions leave an electronic trace and a record of the interaction and can be archived and re-visited.

Secondly, email has the tendency to blur the border between the private and the public, as an email that might be intended for and received by only one person, constituting a private interaction, can then be forwarded by the initial receiver to multiple users, being thus transformed into a public multicast. As one of my interviewees remarked: ‘you can write what you think is a private email and then someone might send it round to everyone else, or you might press the wrong button and then accidentally send it to loads of people, so there are, there is potential for things to go wrong, communication to go wrong in a negative way with the email’ (Hudson, Personal Interview, 2004). The potential for ‘private’ conversations to leak into the public domain is present not only on the level of interpersonal communication between activists, but also on the level of national movements and delegations. Within the London ESF organizing process, for instance, an incident that caused much furor was when a report of a European meeting,
written by the Italian delegation for circulation only on their national list, was translated in English and disseminated widely on the ESF lists. The report contained some very unfavorable remarks about the behavior of the British delegation in the meeting, as British delegates were accused of closed-mindedness, unwillingness to collaborate and provincialism. The Italians attempted to rectify the situation by sending a letter to the British movement where they apologized for ‘the fact that an internal report became public.’ (The Italian Working Group Towards the London ESF, 2004). Hence, one could argue that email can bring about an unintended and often unwanted transparency. This transparency may challenge in a fundamental way the prevailing notions of what constitutes or should constitute a private or public interaction.

However, despite the propensity of email lists to bring to the fore the inner workings of the movement, there were also cases where email lists were used to close down, rather than open up communication. In my interviews with British activists, it became evident that both the ‘Verticals’ and the ‘Horizontals’, the two camps of a conflict that caused much grief within the British movement, circulated information and debated strategies in closed lists that were inaccessible to the other side. The interesting point to note here and according to my interview with a prominent ‘Horizontal’ is that despite the care that was taken to conceal the existence of their secret list, mistakes and transgressions were unavoidable. Such mistakes seemed to arise from the facility with which a private email can accidentally be made public, as the problem was that certain activists ‘were very casual with hitting the “reply all” button and some people just stuck every email list they’ve ever been on every email they sent’ (Hodkinson, Personal Interview, 2004).

The caution with which email should be used in order not to divulge vital information to opponents shows how the communicative affordances of email lists are better suited to increasing rather than reducing transparency. However, the existence of the secret lists also suggests that people are willing to use a medium for functions that it is generally unfit for, when a pressing need arises. It is also worth noting here that it is not only the characteristics of the medium itself, but also the culture of the people using it and their aptitude with the technology that determines the way it functions. In that respect, when people ‘casually hit the reply all button’ or ‘stick every email list they’ve ever been on’ to the message they are sending, the propensity of email lists to increase transparency is strengthened.
Transparency is integral to accountability, as the people responsible cannot be held to account for abuses of power or erroneous decisions, if information about these decisions or abuses, as well as the functioning of the process, are not publicly available. Therefore, by playing a central role in the circulation of information, email lists constitute a vital part of the system of accountability. The electronic traces left by email list communication can then be used to seek responsibility for abuses, mistakes or omissions. According to one of my interviewees, for instance, ‘if you’ve got something online, then you’ve got something as a permanent that can also be used against, against you, against other people’ (Reyes, Personal Interview, 2004).

There are, however, instances, whereby the circulation of too much information may have an adverse effect on transparency and accountability. This is because information overload may limit our epistemic understanding and interpretation of that information, rendering the process more opaque rather than more transparent. In that respect, apart from the circulation of information, a well-functioning process of accountability entails a clear and shared understanding of who should be held accountable, for what and to whom. It also requires a set of common standards by which to judge the performance and behavior of those in power, as well as a system of sanctions to be imposed in the case of abuses, mistakes or transgressions.

I would argue that email lists often tend to obscure rather than clarify these components. Firstly, and as I have already shown in the section relating to responsibility and leadership, email lists enable a more informal and flexible division of labor and allocation of responsibilities that makes it difficult to identify who is to blame when something goes wrong. For instance, with activists joining and dropping out of working groups by subscribing and unsubscribing to the email lists, it is almost impossible to locate responsibility on the level of individual activists but solely on the level of specific bodies and working groups whose membership is always in flux.

Secondly, with the circulation of formal and unofficial reports and minutes on the lists, it is difficult to form a common understanding about the kinds of information that constitute evidence of abuse of power.
Thirdly, the same can be said about the process of creating a shared set of standards with which to judge the performance and behavior of those in power. In the case of the London 2004 ESF, the ‘Horizontals’ and the ‘Verticals’ operated on two different understandings of democracy and the nature of the ESF which were in turn related to a different set of standards. For instance, the ‘Verticals’ viewed the ESF as an event and therefore their standards of performance referred to the efficiency of organizing an event that would attract as many participants as possible. The ‘Horizontals’, on the other hand, viewed the ESF as a process and therefore their standards related more to the democratic functioning of the organizing process of the forum. What is more important here is not really the existence of these deeply entrenched differences. It is rather the fact that until the end there was no real mechanism through which these two parties could come to a compromise and develop a set of common standards of behavior and performance.

Fourthly, the sanctions imposed in the case of abuses or transgressions mainly belong to the peer mechanism. According to Grant and Keohane, within such a mechanism, peer organizations constitute the accountability holders and the costs or sanctions in the case of abuse include ‘[e]ffects on network ties and therefore on others’ support’ (2005: 36). Obviously, the circulation of unofficial and official reports, as well as slanders is very important within this system of peer accountability, as it may tarnish the reputation of power-wielders. However, with no clear and shared standards and with a chaotic system of providing evidence, the decision about whether someone should be held accountable and about what may ultimately rest in the hands of the most influential peers, since it is their interpretation of the situation, and not one derived from commonly shared standards, that has the most currency. In other words, the circulation of too much information on the email lists tends to conceal the fact that certain accountability holders may have more power than others in imposing sanctions.

**Conclusion**

As it became evident in the preceding analysis email lists play an important role in ensuring the flexibility, adaptability and polycentric nature of the organizing structure of the ESF. They thus contribute to the establishment of an organizing model that is in tune with the social forum Charter of Principles. In that respect, email lists facilitate the proliferation of working groups without the need for a central authority overseeing this
process. They also allow the membership of these groups to remain in a state of flux, as they reduce the need for compiling official membership lists. And even though email lists can potentially constitute sources of power and leadership, this leadership tends to be fragmented and temporary. In addition, while all of the major decisions are taken in the offline meetings, email lists aid in ‘opening up’ these meetings to the participation of a variety of actors by installing an informal system of representation whereby activists attending the meetings act as the unofficial representatives of those unable to attend. What is more, email lists have a tendency to increase the internal transparency of the movement, even though they can also be used in the opposite way but with limited success.

Nevertheless, and as it would be expected, the organizing process does not entirely correspond to the social forum ideal. Asymmetries of power still exist, as the process of decision-making and organizing is more accessible to activists with the requisite time and resources to attend the major meetings. In addition, with an informal and unclear system of accountability, the process of holding the people responsible to account is under the control of the most powerful actors in the movement.

Melucci’s comments on new social movements seem to be very pertinent here: ‘[c]ontemporary movements face a deep internal dilemma: the need to ensure the survival of the organization by means of asymmetry-producing functions is flanked by the impossibility of rendering this asymmetry explicit through its formalization, since should this happen, the solidarity and the interpersonal relations are subjected to the threat of a breakdown.’ (1996: 345). In other words, movements based on a belief in non-hierarchical organizing and plurality find it difficult to install formal organizing procedures and decision-making bodies. Some degree of hierarchy or ‘asymmetry’ is however necessary for the survival of the movement and anyway tends to emerge in the process of organization. However, according to Melucci, the problem of current movements is not the asymmetries of power, but the recognition that these asymmetries exist, since this contradicts their core beliefs and thus threatens their foundations. Melucci also notes that in order to resolve this dilemma, movements employ a series of strategies that reduce and at the same time conceal the functions of decision-making and representation (Ibid).
I would argue that this is certainly the case of the ESF organizing process and that the internet plays a vital role in making such functions more informal and thus less explicit. In that respect, email lists constitute a central component of the informal system of representation associated with the offline meetings. Serving as spaces for debate and criticism about the face-to-face meetings, as well as for circulating information, minutes and agendas, email lists reduce the need to formalize the system of representation as those who are being represented do not feel entirely excluded from the process. If they did, there would be greater pressure for a more formal system of representation that could guarantee that the opinions of activists who are absent from the meeting are properly represented.

Furthermore, email lists have an integral role in maintaining an informal system of division of labour and assumption of responsibility. Even though this system ensures the decentralization of power to various actors, asymmetries of power still exist. However, the informality of leadership helps to partly conceal these asymmetries. What is more, this flexible system of accountability also contributes to that respect, as it avoids to locate responsibility on the individual level and to expose the activists in leadership positions. Instead, responsibility is located on the level of self-organizing bodies or working groups and is therefore much more diffuse and abstract. In addition, the information overload on the lists often obscures the process of accountability, as it is difficult to decide which piece of information should constitute evidence of abuse of power.

Therefore, email lists serve the diverse and inclusive ‘organization as ideology’ of the forum in a two-fold way. Firstly, they indeed encourage openness, plurality, participation and the decentralization of leadership. Secondly, they aid in concealing the elements that disturb this image by preventing them from becoming explicit or formal. This allows the movement to maintain a collective and public identity based on the notions of inclusiveness, horizontality and participation, even though those values are not always upheld in the practice of the movement.

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