

Chapter 4

HUNTING PROTESTORS: MOBILISATION, PARTICIPATION AND PROTEST ONLINE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE

Wainer Lusoli and Stephen Ward

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there has been considerable interest in the apparent upsurge of protest activity, especially as traditional representative organisations such as parties and trade unions appear to be in decline in many liberal democracies. A number of accounts have highlighted the importance of the Internet and other new media in the mobilisation of several mass protests and in the activity of campaigning organisations generally (Cisler, 1999; Jordan, 2000; Scott and Street, 2000).¹ There has been considerable speculation as to whether new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can provide a catalyst for political participation and a more active citizenry and, if so, what types of political organisation are likely to benefit (Diani, 2000; Bimber, 1998). However, whilst there has been a growing amount of evidence examining the online strategies of political organisations from a top-down perspective, there has been little evidence emerging from the grassroots about the role of ICTs in participation.

This paper attempts to partially fill this empirical gap through a survey of members of the Countryside Alliance (CA) in the United Kingdom. The alliance has come to prominence over the past six years in opposing government proposals to ban hunting

with dogs, most notably with its large 'Liberty and Livelihood' Protest March in London in September 2002. While the Countryside Alliance has a reputation of representing an ageing, conservative, rural, middle-class membership -- unpromising ground for ICT campaigning -- the organisation has devoted considerable resources to use ICTs for mobilisation purposes. Consequently, the survey examines the profile of members online, the use of the Internet and the attitudes of members towards new ICTs and participation. In short, it assesses what difference ICTs make in the context of Countryside Alliance participation and activism. Under a *widening participation* rubric, we are interested in the importance of the Internet for organisational reach and for a wider social profile of the membership. We find evidence that the Countryside Alliance is reaching out to a slightly wider constituency with quite different socio-demographic traits than the traditional membership: younger, professional and less likely to use traditional media. As concerns *deepening participation*, we are interested in the effects of ICTs on members' general levels of activism and more specific mobilisation in the London march. We find solid evidence that new media are a very effective campaign mobilisation tool, though they are less useful in fostering intra-organisational democracy.

MOBILISATION, PARTICIPATION AND PROTEST ONLINE

The value of ICTs for organisations in terms of mobilisation and participation can be assessed in two areas: (1) widening participation through the inclusion of a greater number and diversity of citizens into the participatory process; and (2) deepening or extending the range and efficacy of participatory activity.

Widening Participation?

At one level, the Internet can be used by organisations for recruitment purposes to increase and maintain membership numbers. From a rational choice perspective, the Internet lowers the barriers (costs) to participation for individuals from more marginal and excluded groups. Political activity such as information gathering, joining organisations or directly contacting political institutions and organisations could become far easier (Bonchek, 1995). The arrival of set-top boxes and Internet TV could allow the housebound, such as the elderly, single parents and the disabled, to participate more easily from their homes. ICTs also could be employed to recruit new members from sections of the community that are less attracted through traditional media and less likely to join political organisations, such as younger citizens who have wider ICT access via educational establishments (Coleman, 2001; Gibson et al, 2002; Lupia and Philpot, 2002).

In contrast to this positive outlook, some have suggested that the Internet is unlikely to make much difference and may indeed widen participation gaps (Norris, 1999, 2001; Katz and Rice, 2002). Firstly, access to the technology is still restricted. A digital divide exists where the poor and elderly, in particular, lack the resources and skills to use the technology. Often these are the very people who already are disengaged from the political process. The Internet may provide additional resources for those already participating. Secondly, although the technology may provide the means to engage with political organisations and institutions, it does not provide the motivation to do so. Without wider reforms in the overall structure of political opportunities, i.e. the increased willingness of organisations to provide engagement opportunities, the

technology alone is unlikely to make people more interested in politics or engage with political organisations (Lusoli et al., 2002).

Deepening Participation?

Aside from simply increasing the number of participants, the Internet could both extend participatory activity and deepen the quality of the participatory experience (Ward et al. 2003; Rheingold, 2002). The speed and convenience of ICTs may encourage participants to supplement and extend their range of participatory experiences. The interactivity of the Internet, in the form of email, discussion fora and live chatrooms, provides the public with a range of additional channels to voice their opinions on issues. In theory, ICTs make it possible to participate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year (Washbourne, 1999). The Internet also provides greater possibilities for organisational members to network both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, it is now easier for individual members to advance their views directly to organisational elites via electronic means. Political organisations can post online large amounts of policy information/documents and encourage feedback directly from members, supporters and the wider public. Similarly, leading figures from political organisations can now engage in online debate and question-and-answer sessions with members much more directly than through traditional media. Horizontally, the net can further online community building or networking and increase member-to-member contacts via email lists, discussion groups and hyperlinks on websites. Studies of traditional forms of participation indicate the importance of regular contact with an organisation for maintaining members' interest and rates of participation. Theoretically, this should be easier via application of ICTs. The interactivity, speed and networking potential of ICT

participation could actually enhance the quality of participatory experiences.

Pessimists, however, are sceptical of the ability of electronic forms of participation to deepen participation activities or produce meaningful political deliberation. In the first place, they question whether ICTs can really foster networking and community building online, arguing that most ICT communication is a relatively passive and solitary experience that is unlikely to link participants together and develop collective ties. Face-to-face networking, Diani suggests, is far more effective in generating activism and increased levels of social capital (2000). Secondly, critics contend that the individualistic push-button mode of participation will actually render participation less meaningful and erode citizen interest, making collective action harder and elites less accountable (Lipow and Seyd, 1996; Barber, 1997; Street, 1997). Participation through electronic referenda and the like may become no more than registering individual preferences (McLean, 1989). Whilst citizens may have access to large amounts of information online, they may either become overloaded and switch off, or avoid it and insulate themselves from alternative opinions by only selecting a narrow range of online information sources (Shapiro, 1999; Sunstein, 2001).

THE RISE OF RURAL PROTEST

The Growth of the Countryside Alliance

Over the past decade or so, a number of countries have witnessed the rise of protest groups and movements focused around a rural agenda (Woods, 2003 and 2004).

Prominent amongst this trend in the United Kingdom has been the growth of the

Countryside Alliance. While it is a relative newcomer to protest politics (1997), the Countryside Alliance has well-established roots, having been formed from an amalgamation of three established pressure groups – the British Field Sports Society (BFSS), the Countryside Movement and the Countryside Business Group. Although the Countryside Alliance's agenda covers a broad range of rural issues, critics argue that the alliance is still primarily a pro-hunting organisation with only an opportunistic interest in other rural issues.² Yet, whilst hunting is clearly at the core of the alliance's agenda, many involved in its formation and early direction saw the need for the organisation to represent a broader constituency (Woods, 1998). Certainly, the Countryside Alliance has been sustained over the past six years by a variety of rural crises and emerging issues, which have provided ammunition in its fight with the current British Labour Government. These have included: an ongoing crisis in the agricultural sector most notably highlighted by the Foot and Mouth epidemic in 2001; the fuel protests in autumn 2001 highlighting that increasing government petrol duties have a disproportionate impact on the car-reliant rural public; the government proposals for increasing access to the countryside through its 'right to roam' legislation; and apparent reductions in a range of rural public services, notably proposals to close rural post offices. It is noticeable also that the Countryside Alliance has drawn on anti-Labour feeling among traditionally conservative rural voters (Ward, 2002). Though the pro-hunting cause is by far the most prominent issue, the Countryside Alliance has tapped into and encouraged the perception of a growing urban-rural divide in the United Kingdom, arguing that rural issues and countryside pursuits have been misunderstood and discriminated against by an urban political class. Richard Burge, the CA's Chief Executive, encapsulated this view when he claimed that the purpose of the Liberty and

Livelihood march was 'about country mindedness, and country minded people who feel disenfranchised by the system (and) feel like a colony in their own nation ... The march is about them demanding to be heard'.³ In short, Woods (1998) characterises the Countryside Alliance approach as one of reactive ruralism to 'a perceived challenge from ill-informed urban intervention'.

Organisational and Member Profile

Organisationally, the Countryside Alliance is a combination of a traditional pressure group and a social movement organisation. It is perhaps most akin to what Diani and Donati (1999: 17) describe as a professional protest organisation, which combines professional activism, mobilisation of financial resources and confrontational tactics amongst its tactical options. The Countryside Alliance has a professional staff of around 100 people (including policy and campaigns staff, communications and press officials and regional directors) based mainly in offices in London and Worcestershire. Although membership income is important for the organisation, it is supported by a considerable number of wealthy backers. The Countryside Alliance operates under a partial internal democracy with regional and county branches that are able to organise their own activities. Individual members elect the executive board by postal ballot and can contribute to Annual General Meetings.

The Countryside Alliance combines traditional lobbying, research, petitions and letter-writing campaigns, along with a series of national marches and rallies. The Countryside Alliance is probably best known for the three large-scale London marches it organised in July 1997, March 1998 and September 2002. The most recent 'Liberty and

Livelihood' demonstration was one of biggest protest events ever seen in the United Kingdom. Such events were important not only in attracting considerable media coverage⁴ but also in symbolical terms, building the image of the Countryside Alliance as a wider rural protest organisation. It is clear that the alliance has drawn on the example of large environmental organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, but also more radically on the activities of direct-action protest networks (Doherty et al., 2003; Woods, 2003 and 2004).

There are few statistics on the socio-demographic or political profile of the CA membership or their participatory activities. The stereotypical picture portrayed by its opponents is of wealthy, middle-aged/elderly, middle-class conservative members obsessed by hunting, fishing and shooting (Norton, 2002). The Countryside Alliance has countered this line by stressing that its membership extends beyond the hunting fraternity and covers a wide range of social backgrounds from agricultural labourers to country landowners.⁵ Limited evidence comes from three MORI surveys of participants in various countryside rallies and marches, who are not necessarily alliance members. All three surveys indicate a similar supporter base with a very high proportion of middle-class, relatively affluent, overwhelmingly Conservative voters. They are particularly from southern England with hunting acting as the main stimulus for participation on the marches.⁶ Strikingly, this profile is very dissimilar from the typecast of the traditional protestor – young, politically unaffiliated and progressive.

The Countryside Alliance and Online Campaigning⁷

Given the traditional membership profile of the Countryside Alliance, there is a

surprising degree of technological development within the organisation as well as considerable investment in staff and resources.⁸ The nucleus of the organisation's communication infrastructure is the Rural Communication Network (RCN), which is located in rural Hagley. The RCN move to a larger, more modern estate in summer 2002 reflects the growth in importance of communication within the organisation. The communication strategy of the Countryside Alliance has been increasingly decentralised, though co-ordinated centrally via the RNC, with more power given to regional directors to communicate with the media. The IT unit at the RNC is reported to benefit from extensive freedom of action within the organisation. Three staff at the Countryside Alliance RCN worked permanently on the web.

The Countryside Alliance website (www.countryside-alliance.org) was first set up in May 1998. It was restructured in 2001, when it moved from an ISP type of website aimed at servicing a limited number of stakeholders to a higher-profile corporate design. An online joining facility was then added in August 2002 to sustain the membership drives of the organisations involved in the alliance. The website claims over '100,000 full ordinary members plus some 250,000 associate members through affiliated clubs and societies'.⁹ The Countryside Alliance operates with two main databases, one for the management of the emailing list, the second including data on membership and email contact details for a small minority (12 per cent) of the membership. There is an ongoing attempt to consolidate the two databases into a single, functional unit. The *Grass-E-Route* is the weekly electronic newsletter of the Countryside Alliance. Circulation is estimated at 250,000 as it is posted on around 500 websites (November 2002) and circulated via several mailing lists. In addition, 14 regional e-newsletters -

with targeted local information - are distributed every fortnight. Membership of the mailing list is in the region of 35,000. Overall, the Countryside Alliance seems to have invested considerable time and in thought the development of an IT structure. The Countryside Alliance web manager has stated they believe that 'the Internet has enabled us to reach out to a larger audience by providing a portal to our campaigns which is updated every day'.¹⁰

RESEARCH DESIGN

In assessing the participatory potential of ICTs for the Countryside Alliance, we undertook a survey of its membership and set out to explore and analyse the use of ICTs by alliance members. Data were gathered in two main areas. The first area is descriptive and exploratory, the second more hypothesis-based. We first asked about the demographic composition and patterns of Internet use of the alliance online membership as compared to traditional alliance members. Then, we investigated the political profile and the online political behaviours of different categories of Countryside Alliance supporters: off-liners, on-liners and site visitors who are not formally members. In reporting online connectedness, we wanted to understand whether ICTs *widen* and *deepen* membership participation. Specifically, four research questions are drawn from the debate on the changing nature of the organisation presented above and addressed in the context of ICT use by the organisation's membership:

1. *Organisational reach*: Do ICTs widen the Countryside Alliance's organisational reach?

2. *Diverse membership*: Do ICTs balance the social profile of the membership?
3. *Increasing levels of activism*: Do ICTs increase members' organisational activism?
4. *Effective mobilisation*: Do ICTs favours mobilisation, and who is mobilised?

Data were collected using both a postal and an online survey that were agreed to by the Countryside Alliance webmaster and endorsed by the organisation. The online and postal questionnaires were identical, except that the online version made a (positive) assumption about the respondents' use of the Internet. The postal questionnaire was sent to 1,969 randomly selected members. To ensure representativeness, the sample was geographically stratified across the 17 administrative regions of the alliance. The questionnaire and a cover letter from the alliance were sent out on 6 December 2002. Two weeks after the closing date (20 December) the response rate for the postal survey was 21.3 per cent.

The online survey was active for three weeks, from 13 December 2002 to 6 January 2003. The Countryside Alliance sent a 'cover' email with a link to the online questionnaire to the 38,000 subscribers to the *Grass-E-Route* mailing list. Additionally, the cover email was posted on the homepage of the Countryside Alliance website (13 December). After the screening for genuine duplicates, 1,476 unique questionnaires from both postal and online survey were processed and analysed using SPSS.

Unless otherwise specified, results are based only on members from the postal survey (valid N = 411).¹¹ Online and offline respondents were similar in terms of socio-economic status and general political orientations, but online respondents were considerably younger and slightly better off. The online method appears to reduce the

well-known self-selection biases of postal surveys related to age, education level and occupation. Results for political attitudes and behaviour of both samples are remarkably similar. On-liners are very similar across the two modes of administration, and represent a progressive element for the re-balancing of the response bias.

DATA ANALYSIS

Socio-Demographic Profile and General Political Attitudes

Our survey's results on the socio-demographic profile of respondents corroborate the stereotypical picture of Countryside Alliance members. Alliance membership is predominantly male – two in three members – and drawn from the eldest segment of the population, as 63 per cent are at least 50 years old. Just three per cent of members are under the age of 26. Income levels are also relatively high. Only 21 per cent report earnings below £15,000 per year, whereas 40 per cent report earnings in excess of £35,000. Occupational patterns and education levels reflect the age profile of membership. Almost 40 per cent are retired, while only two per cent are students. One in three hold a University degree, while an additional one in six members has attained A levels. Those members in active employment include 20 per cent in professional and higher technical work, whilst small business owners represent 13 per cent of the membership.

Our data profile the political attitudes of alliance members more precisely than anecdotal media reports. Countryside Alliance membership is constituted by a core of politically moderate members - both in terms of ideology and activism - and a large subgroup of conservative, politically active members. In terms of political interest,

numbers decrease along the ideological slopes of political activism and apathy, with a robust predominance of neutral attitudes towards politics: 53 per cent of members report an 'average' interest in politics. The political views of Countryside Alliance members lean clearly to the centre-right of the political spectrum. On a left-right scale (range: 0-6), the average CA member scores 4.3, which is located approximately between the centre and the right extreme (mode = 4). The very low variance (standard deviation = 1.1) suggests that the group is ideologically homogeneous, at least on the traditional left-right dimension. We also found that Countryside Alliance members who are also Conservative Party members are significantly more interested in politics ($\gamma = .43^{***}$, $N = 1,168$) and further on the right than non party-affiliated members ($\gamma = .33^{***}$, $N = 1,118$).

Many of the respondents are long-term Countryside Alliance supporters, having first joined the British Field Sports Society (49 per cent), which provides qualified support for the claim that the Countryside Alliance has the interests of the hunting fraternity at its core. Of the remaining half of the membership, one in six have been members for a year or less, one in five joined two to three years ago, while only one in ten joined four to five years ago. However, we found no significant difference in political orientations between old and new members. The profile of the growth in membership tentatively suggests that the Countryside Alliance has succeeded in their aim of widening their membership base.

Finally, respondents report high levels of organisational activity (see Table 1). Low-engagement activities are quite common among the membership. Three in four

members regularly read Countryside Alliance literature, while two in four talk to colleagues and friends about the alliance and donate money to it. Respondents report similarly high levels of campaign engagement of different types. Around 60 per cent of membership attends political rallies and demonstrations, with 35 per cent also attending fairs and social/organisational events. An additional 10 per cent claim to campaign for the alliance. 'Sub-elite' organisational behaviours record considerably smaller numbers. A proportion ranging from 1.5 per cent to 2.5 per cent hold official positions; visit Countryside Alliance offices and headquarters; or perform volunteer clerical work for the organisation.

<Table 1 about here.>

Internet Adoption and Use

Countryside Alliance members report remarkably high levels of Internet access and use, especially given the age profile of the membership. Fifty-seven per cent of the membership has accessed email, the web or Intranet systems (N = 411). This roughly corresponds to the British average, as individual access to Internet was recorded at 62 per cent in October 2002 (ONS, 2002). Ninety-six per cent of online members have used email, 90 per cent have accessed the World Wide Web, while 32 per cent have used an Intranet/closed-access communication system. Access from home exceeds access at work, for both the online and the offline respondents.

Despite relatively high levels of Internet access, 45 per cent of members responding to the postal survey have never accessed the Countryside Alliance website, 10 per cent

have done so once, and an additional 25 per cent has accessed the site irregularly in relation to specific events. Thus, one in five of online members use their organisation's site regularly – only one in nine overall. These figures are comparable with those relative to use of traditional technologies to keep in touch with the alliance – phone (45 per cent), letter (48 per cent) and face-to-face meetings (44 per cent). The only notable exception is 'print material from the organisation' (76 per cent), which does not require members' initiative.

The site is accessed mainly for information purposes (see Table 2). The most frequently accessed features include seeking information on current events, alliance campaigns and policy. The *Grass-E-Route* (the alliance email bulletin) is received by 84 per cent of online members, and the alliance newsletter and magazine on the site by 83 per cent. Information is also the most highly valued feature of the site. Organisational information and feedback scores lower, both in terms of access and usefulness. In terms of the attractiveness of online joining or recruitment possibilities, it is interesting to note that the online membership application/renewal has been accessed by half of the online members, and rated just above average ($\mu = 3.6$, standard deviation = 1.7).

<Table 2 about here.>

People are less drawn to the new interactive 'community' features afforded by new media. The online trade directory, the discussion point and online auction are least popular. This result is confirmed by the type of features 'members would like to see on the CA site'. The ability to sign petitions online was rated highest at 5.1 on a 0-6 scale

of desirability, followed by a range of traditional political activities *qua* the Internet. Access to a local branch website scored an average of 4.3, email details of leadership 3.9. Online voting for both Countryside Alliance policies and elected officials also were reported as highly desirable features. However, the more innovative, online features – such as online discussion fora and members-only area of the site – scored lower averages, had higher variance and higher ‘don’t know’ rates (see Table 3).¹²

<Table 3 about here.>

Expanding Organisational Reach?

Overall, the Countryside Alliance seems to reach online an audience that is different from their traditional field-sports base. Zero-order correlation results suggest that the Internet-using member is significantly younger than the average member, from a higher educational background and, partly as a consequence, has higher income levels than the average for alliance members (see Table 4). Internet users tend to be employed in professional/higher technical/managerial jobs, significantly more so than their non-user counterpart. This partly depends on the rate of retired members in the two groups, as only one in five members who are Internet users are retired, compared to two in three amongst non-users. Internet users reside principally in London’s southeast, while they are under-represented in Scotland, especially in east Scotland. Internet users tend to be recent recruits to the alliance, and they report significantly higher levels of interest in politics (especially online respondents as compared with postal survey respondents). Finally, slightly more members are male than female among Internet users as compared to non-users.¹³

<Table 4 about here>.

The strength and extent of the expansion hypothesis was tested using three sets of results from our survey. First, we asked about the profile of those members, specifically Internet users, who have visited the Countryside Alliance website. Data suggests that site visitors come equally from different socio-economic and political interest categories, except for age, as younger members-users tend to visit the site more often than any other category of members. In general then, the alliance site attracts younger-than-average members who are otherwise quite similar to membership at large. Secondly, within the wide range of methods members might use to keep in touch with the Countryside Alliance – letter, fax, phone, face-to-face meetings and printed material -- we have identified a significant negative effect of Internet use on letter writing. Members who are Internet users tend to write to the alliance considerably less frequently than the average member ($\gamma = .24^{**}$, $N = 420$). Third, we asked about (online) survey respondents who are not members, although they use the alliance site and *Grass-E-Route* to keep in touch with the organisation. Twenty-five per cent of online respondents are not Countryside Alliance members. This figure is telling about the capacity of the Internet to reach beyond the boundaries of the ‘institutional’ organisation. When we check the media consumption habits of this group,¹⁴ we find they are considerably less likely to use any traditional media to keep in touch with the alliance (γ ranges from 0.41^{***} to 0.84^{***} , $N = 1,008$). They are younger ($\gamma = .24^{***}$, $N = 1,039$) and have lower income levels ($\gamma = .17^{***}$, $N = 1,033$). Hence, both the *Grass-E-Route* and the Countryside Alliance site may serve to both numerically expand membership and diversify the profile of that membership.

Increasing Engagement?

Both email and World Wide Web have an important role for increasing levels of activism among members, especially in relation to campaign activities. The possibility of signing online petitions is the single most important feature members would like to see on the alliance site. We asked members whether the CA website and emails from the organisation led them to engage in a range of organisational activities. The results suggest that both media play an important role in mobilising supporters. The most significant results are indeed in the areas of campaigning and contacting (see Table 5). In fact, 31 per cent of members claimed that use of the Countryside Alliance websites led them to participate in the London March. Surprisingly, postal respondents equal this average whereas online respondents are below average and 45 per cent of non-member users of the site report the web as a main influence. Similarly, 15 per cent and 13 per cent of the members respectively claimed that the web led them to attend another rally/demonstration or participate in a specific campaign. Hence, web mobilisation is strong, and concerns mostly audiences that, at least in theory, are supposedly less suitable for a 'net effect'. Furthermore, the web is an important stimulus for individualised forms of political participation, such as writing letters to political representatives (18 per cent) and to the media (12 per cent). Finally, the web is much less functional for engaging members in routine collective organisational activities: volunteering time/work, attending branch meetings or purchasing services. Email is reportedly at least as important as the web in facilitating campaign participation. Almost every other respondent claims that email led them to attend the London march; in addition, one in three report attending another rally and one in four report participating

in a specific campaign due to email communication from the alliance. Email has also an extremely important function in stimulating contact with others on alliance issues.

Almost 42 per cent report that email led them to write to a representative, and 47 per cent forwarded the information received. Additionally, 25 per cent have contacted the media after receiving an email from the alliance. Finally, email seems marginally more effective than the web in drawing people into routine activities. Conversely, the website is relatively more effective in eliciting donations and encouraging people to join the organisation.

<Table 5 about here.>

The results of this study challenge the received view that email is the ‘killer application’ in online campaigning, a powerful activation tool for newcomers to politics on the Net. Our data suggest that email is a powerful mobilisation tool for members who are already engaged online. Conversely, the World Wide Web has a wider impact on less frequent and less active Internet users. While email clearly emerged as an important activation factor for online respondents, including non-members, the web is slightly more important for those who responded offline. That the web is mainly an entry point for subsequent, higher-level engagement with a political organisation is in line with the results of previous studies about the use of the Internet to mobilise supporters (Ward, Lusoli and Gibson, 2003).

MOBILISATION: THE MARCH ON LONDON

The march in London on 22 September 2002 created a considerable degree of public interest around the Countryside Alliance. The march was announced on 22 April,

capitalising on the interest created the previous year by the Foot and Mouth epidemic.¹⁵ The march was attended by 63 per cent of the membership. The consequences in terms of traffic on the Countryside Alliance site were significant. The average number of monthly visitors increased from some 40,000 visits per month to 57,000 in August and 160,000 in September. A special march website was set up roughly three months before the march to help co-ordinate activities (<http://www.march-info.org>). The site attracted some 120,000 visits over the time span of its existence (as of December 2004, it still existed only as a historical marker). It further prompted the subsequent development of an 'activism' section on the CA main site, which allows members to get more involved with the organisation. The *Grass-E-Route* email list grew from an average of 20,000 over 2002 to a peak of 40,000 in the run-up to the London march. In terms of resources, two additional staff were employed at the time of the protest to manage the march website and co-ordinate online activities. Two special emails were sent out in the fortnight preceding the march with details of small-scale action around the country.

Within this framework of reference, we tried to assess more precisely the importance of the Internet for march participants. We specifically asked members about attendance at the march, sources of information used to keep informed about the event, and frequency of access to the special march site. Printed material from the alliance is the highest rated media for information about the march, followed by the national press (see Table 6). However, different types of respondents relied on different sources. Online media, such as the alliance mailing list and the two websites, were much more important for online respondents than for postal respondents. This is hardly surprising, even though knowledge about the websites negatively biases the results, i.e. the low score depends

mainly on a lack of visibility rather than a negative assessment of the service. Indeed, the high standard deviation value for postal respondents show that once the sites or email service were accessed, the evaluations are substantially higher, even higher than value attributed to traditional media.

<Table 6 about here.>

We employed logistic regression analysis to assess the importance of the web as a mobilising factor for the London March on the range of socio-economic, attitudinal and information-seeking behaviours discussed above. It is worth remembering that 31 per cent of members who use the internet reported the web as an important stimulus for them to join in the march (see Table 6). The results of our final logistic model are quite telling (see Table 7). The web seems to be especially important for recent CA members, and members who are less likely to have contact with their fellow members. Mobilised members are habitual users of the web, and have frequently accessed both the march site and the alliance main site. Web-activated respondents also are more likely to have followed the campaign in the press, which indicates a reinforcement effect between printed and new media. The same does not apply to television. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that online respondents are more likely to report web-activation than postal respondents.

The most conspicuous finding is that traditional socio-economic variables – high income, younger age and higher education – have insignificant and weak relation with web mobilisation in both the zero order correlations and the multivariate model.

Similarly, the level of respondents' political interest and left-right orientations seem to have no effect on online mobilisation. Online mobilisation seems to be embedded in online dynamics, i.e. general web habits and activities, and does not follow pre-existing, traditional patterns of political socialisation. In other words, online mobilisation builds more on the familiarity with information technologies than on a personal history of political engagement – or the lack thereof.

If the question is whether the Internet is mobilising a new constituency, the answer is probably yes. Yet, if we ask whether the Internet has mobilised the previously engaged (existing activists) or the disengaged (politically uninterested), our data suggest the answer is a resounding 'neither.' The constituency reached by the web is very new to issue politics, has average levels of political activism and no specific socio-demographic traits. This group may have latent sympathies for the issue or organisation but it is the ICTs that make them an 'engageable' constituency. This possibly supports early claims of political dis-intermediation via ICTs, albeit in the context of a political organisation rather than a polity at large (Becker, 1981; Poster, 1996; for a critique see also Coleman, 1999). The question remains, however, whether the mobilising importance of ICTs remains once they are exposed to 'real' life political events. Further research is needed to explore the changing patterns of mutual relationship between the virtual and the real in the domain of political mobilisation.

CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to increasing scepticism about whether ICTs can really *widen* participation, our survey results indicate they have significant *widening potential*. Of course, this is

not a uniform process - certain groups are more susceptible to online mobilisation than others. This study of the Countryside Alliance underscores the importance of organisations in the mobilisation process and more specifically the organisational context and culture. Despite the hype about ICTs fostering a more direct form of democracy, organisations still have key roles to play in the participatory politics. If ICTs are to be used to widen political participation, then they need to be linked to a wider communication strategy. In our study, ICTs were embedded into the alliance's broader organisational strategy of widening its general profile, both in issue and membership terms. ICTs were successfully employed by the Countryside Alliance to achieve this broader organisational goal.

We also found evidence of *deepening* in our study. Members were engaging in new activities online, especially those who were already the most active in the alliance and generally members who saw ICTs as a valuable resource in this respect. Again, this not a uniform process. When we look at the types of participation most undertaken and valued, it is generally the more passive and individualised forms of activity that have increased, notably receiving and reading information. Whilst much of the academic and media focus of e-participation has been on e-enabled interactive discussion, i.e bulletin boards, chat rooms, etc., these types of e-participation are the ones less favoured by participants. For professional protest movements such as the Countryside Alliance, the technology is beneficial in the context of mobilisation via top-down information and political marketing rather than as networking or discussion tool. This reiterates the point that political organisations will use the technologies in ways that bolster their pre-existing organisational culture. Professional protest organisations that have less of a commitment to grassroots democracy are likely to use them for information

dissemination and as occasional mobilising tools.

The survey also provided evidence of how people are activated. While we do not dispute the standard story of the reinforcement effect, where offline activists extend their activity online, our survey intriguingly found some evidence of a possible Internet effect as mobilisation was engendered by virtual, rather than traditional, triggers. The survey uncovered a group of people, who had an average interest in politics and were inactive offline, who *were* mobilised through the net. As yet we have no way of knowing whether this is a novelty factor or how such a group will be socialised over time. On the technology side, the view of ICTs or the new media are a total package reduces differences types of technologies to one category with apparently uniform effects. The research here supports other organisational surveys we have conducted (Ward et al., 2003) that the use of different types of ICT may well produce different participatory results. It appears from an organisational perspective that websites are more useful for initial recruitment and information dissemination purposes while email is then more useful for activating members.

The survey here cannot claim to be representative of the pressure group and social movement world as a whole. What is now required is long-term tracking of activist groups in different organisational contexts and additional qualitative data – interviews, online diaries etc. – on whether 'virtual' mobilisation then turns into 'real' political activity. Do people activated online with little or no previous political history gradually become politicised and engaged both online and offline over time? If this were to be the case, then new ICTs may well be offering something novel to participatory politics. However, the study does add additional evidence to claims about the relationship

between the new media and participation in a specific organisational context. In particular, it sheds additional light on questions of who participates online (the widening question), what types of participation in which they are engaged (the deepening question) as well as how and why people participate -- and role of new ICTs in this process.

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NOTES

¹ For example, see the discussion of the Stop the War campaign online in 'revolution for revolt', Alistair Alexander, *The Guardian*, 20 February 2003.

² Corporate Watch's Report (2002) 'The Countryside Alliance - Voice of the Rural Dispossessed?!', http://www.coporatewatch.org.uk/pages/Countryside_Alliance.html;
'Hunters Accused of Hijacking Protest', John Vidal, *The Guardian*, 21 September 2002.

³ Interview with Epolitix.com, 20 September 2002.

⁴ Both broadsheets and mid-range newspapers carried the march as front-page news. *The Daily Telegraph*, a staunch supporter of CA's hunting stance, carried five pages of coverage.

⁵ See Countryside Alliance press release, 25 October 2002, 'Countryside Alliance Membership Breaks 100,000', <http://www.countryside-alliance.org/news/02/021025tat.htm>.

⁶ See the following surveys: 'The Countryside March - Who was really there?' MORI 1997, <http://www.mori.com/polls/1998/hunting3.shtml>; 'The Edinburgh Countryside March Poll', MORI 2001, <http://www.mori.com/polls/2001/edinburgh.shtml>; 'Hunting March Unrepresentative of the Countryside', League Against Cruel Sports press release, 22 September 2002, http://www.league.uk.com/news/media_briefings/2002/september_2002/22_sep_02_hunting_march_unrepresentative.htm.

⁷ This section is based partly on information gathered from several interviews with CA staff.

⁸ A *Guardian* report claimed that the CA has an extremely sophisticated database records on supporters and some of its opponents ('Hunt Lobby holds personal files on thousands', 1 November 2002).

⁹ http://www.countryside-alliance.org/The_Alliance/about_us/about_us/, accessed 7 December 2004.

¹⁰ See article 'anti-government activism' at <http://www.globalprofile.co.uk>

¹¹ Standard notation is used for statistical significance, * = sig. p. < 0.05, ** = sig. p. < 0.01, *** = sig. p. = 0.001.

¹² A further question on 'comfort using the Internet rather than traditional media' was asked of Internet users and non-users alike for a range of organisational activities. Results corroborate the findings reported in text.

¹³ Several alternative logistic regression models were run with Internet use as dependent variable. We included socio-economic status and political attitudes variables having significant zero-order correlations as independents. In all models occupation, income and age were the main predictors, while betas for political orientations and political engagement were either non-significant or small.

¹⁴ Here, members responding online are the contrast group: N = 1,039, members n = 779, non-members n = 260.

¹⁵ This highly contagious disease among animals led to the mass cull of livestock, with severe consequences for farmers who lost breeding stock. Although the farmers were compensated, feelings ran high over the government's approach to the problem.

Table 1

Organisational involvement of CA members

	Overall	Online	Postal	Difference
Read CA's literature	73 %	72 %	74 %	- 0.02
Attend rallies / demonstrations	60 %	67 %	47 %	- 0.20 ***
Talk to colleagues / friends about the CA	51 %	56 %	42 %	- 0.13 ***
Donate money	49 %	46 %	54 %	0.07 *
Attend fairs / social events	36 %	39 %	29 %	- 0.10 **
Meet with other members	14 %	17 %	11 %	- 0.08 **
Campaign for the CA	10 %	14 %	3 %	- 0.18 ***
Official position	2.5 %	4 %	1 %	- 0.10 ***
Visit CA offices	2 %	3 %	.	- 0.09 **
Volunteer clerical work	1.5 %	2 %	.	- 0.08 **
N	1190	779	411	

Difference is measured with $\hat{\delta}$, * = sig. p. < 0.05, ** = sig. p. < 0.01, *** = sig. p. =

0.001.

Table 2. Internet access at home and work.

		Never	Once a month or less	Once a week	Every other day	Daily	Many times a day
		%	%	%	%	%	%
Home	Online	9	4	15	17	34	22
	Postal	14	11	19	18	30	8
Work	Online	38	2	3	4	17	36
	Postal	43	5	6	6	15	27

Online survey N = 779. Postal survey N = 236.

Table 3

Access to and usefulness of CA website features.

	Access %	Mean usefulness	SD
Information on current events	93	4.7	1.2
Information on CA campaigns	89	4.6	1.2
Information on policy	86	4.7	1.3
<i>Grass-E-Route</i>	84	5.1	1.2
Newsletter / magazines	83	4.3	1.3
Information on CA structure	73	3.6	1.6
Links to related sites	66	3.9	1.6
Feedback (e.g. email)	56	3.7	1.8
Membership application / renewal	52	3.6	1.7
Internet trade directory	47	2.8	1.7
Educational section	44	3.3	1.7
CA internet auction	44	2.7	1.8
Discussion point	42	3.0	1.7

N = 858 (both online and postal). Includes members who have visited the CA website. Usefulness of site features is measured on a 0-6 scale.

Table 4. Desirability of CA website features.

	Mean	SD	DK
Online petitions to sign	5.1	1.5	4 %
Website of local branch	4.3	1.8	3 %
Online voting for policy issues	4.0	1.9	5 %
Email details of leadership	3.9	1.8	6 %
Online voting for elected officials	3.8	1.9	5 %
List of members in my area	3.7	2.0	4 %
Members only area of the site	3.5	2.1	9 %
Online discussion forums	2.9	1.8	9 %

N = 948. Members who are Internet users. Both online and surveys.

Table 5

Socio-demographic characteristics of CA members.

		<i>Non users</i>	<i>Users</i>
Gender	Female	43%	31%
Age	18 to 25	1%	4%
	26 - 35	2%	12%
	36 - 49	10%	33%
	Above 70	44%	7%
Income	£ 25,000 to £ 34,999	13%	20%
	£ 35,000 to £ 49,999	10%	15%
	£ 50,000 or more	15%	26%
Education	No qualifications	15%	1%
	Professional qualification	12%	7%
	GCSE - O levels	29%	17%
	A levels	13%	20%
	Undergraduate degree (e.g. BA)	17%	31%
	Postgraduate degree (e.g. MA)	4%	13%
Residence	Scotland East	5 %	2 %
	London	3%	8%

	Wessex	4%	8%
Occupation	Professional or higher technical work	5%	32%
	Manager or Senior Administrator	4%	14%
	Small business owner	10%	18%
	Student		2%
	Retired	64%	19%
N		175	1115

Figures reported are column percentages. Only category values where differences between users and non-users are significant at $p. < 0.05$ are reported.

Table 6

Web and email activation.

		<i>Website</i>			<i>Email</i>		
		Postal members	Online members	Non members	Postal members	Online members	Non members
	Attend the London March	31	28	45	22	50	58
<i>Campaign activities</i>	Attend other rally or demonstration	11	16	14	8	42	22
	Participate in a specific campaign	9	14	11	7	34	17
	Write to an elected representative	17	20	14	13	53	29
	Write to the media	9	13	10	8	34	15
<i>Contact activities</i>	Forward information to a friend (non member)	14	17	19	16	56	48
	Contact the CA with views / comments	6	10	7	7	27	18
	Contact other members	2	5	6	5	24	13
<i>Money-related activities</i>	Donate money to CA	14	16	13	8	27	14
	Join the CA	11	13	3	2	11	7
<i>Institutional activities</i>	Attend a social event	5	7	4	6	19	8
	Volunteer some time / work	4	4	2	3	16	6
	Attend a local branch meeting	3	4	1	4	16	1
	Purchase services	3	9	6	2	7	3
	N	242	759	261			

Results reported are percentages. Source: Q8 'Has use of the Countryside Alliance website or email information from the Countryside Alliance ever led you to undertake any of the following activities...'