Contextualizing Technology Use: Communication Practices in a Local Homeless Movement*

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Abstract

This paper presents a contextualized analysis of the ways that organizers did and did not use Internet enabled communication technologies in an organizing context in which material inequality was a prominent focus: a local homeless movement. Few studies on ICTs and social movements have taken seriously the very real material inequalities that structure technology use. While all movements include participants that either do not have access to ICTs, or choose not to use them based on organizing contexts, these participants have been systematically excluded from analysis in the rush to understand how a narrow technological elite think, feel, and act in relation to ICTs. I draw on a communication oriented participant observation of three overlapping campaigns to examine the communication practices employed by both housed and unhoused organizers: a campaign to 'Stop the Sweeps' of urban homeless encampments, a direct action tent-city project aimed at providing emergency shelter for up to 1,000 people called 'Nickelsville,' and a campaign to stop the construction of a new jail organized around the 'No New Jail' slogan. Four themes are presented that characterize the strategies organizers used in communicating within and between constituents: how organizers emphasized "relational" face-to-face communication, used ICTs to connect with housed allies, encouraged participants to move from the computer screen to street, and relied upon existing organizationally sponsored communications infrastructure in facilitating communication tasks. I propose that an analysis of communication practices broadly defined is important in understanding the role of technologies of communication more specifically.

Keywords: *technology, communication, social movement, campaign, homelessness, participant observation, brokerage*

Contextualizing Technology Use: Communication Practices in a Local Homeless Movement

Much of the research on technology use in social movements points to a new era of collective action within which the old rules no longer apply (Lupia and Sin, 2003), formal organizations are increasingly less relevant (Bimber et al., 2005), and where individual political action is elevated to a more prominent status within personalized electronic social networks (Bennett, 2003a). An increasing reliance on Internet technologies for organizing activities is indeed changing the dynamics of mobilization in heavily networked societies, influencing the ways that activists find out about and coordinate participation in actions on the ground (Fisher et al., 2005), as well as enabling the emergence of online activist tactics that no longer rely on co-presence the way that traditional protests, strikes or occupations do (Earl, 2006). But this reliance on Internet technologies for organizing has brought new challenges for practitioners, sometimes displacing low-cost advantages with high cost barriers to their effective use (Nielsen, 2009). These organizational constraints are compounded by the stratification of Internet use. Demographic indicators like income, education, race, and urban/rural residence are significant determinants to use of online technologies (Perrons, 2004), and the discrepancies are greatest when we look at who is most likely not only to consume content online, but to actually produce it (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007). However, scholars such as Castells (2001) continue to emphasize the enormity of the social shifts that such technology use entails, providing little recognition of the diversity of actual use that individuals and communities make of these emerging and transformative technologies. Instead, a growing demographic of Internet elites are assumed to function as representatives of the entirety of social activity, either obscuring the activities of 'late adopters' or implying that people who do not yet participate in the informational vanguard will uncritically replicate the behavioral patterns of 'early adopters.'

One area where research on diversity of use might be expected to be most prominent is in the field dedicated to studying the 'digital divide,' most commonly found in development literature concentrating on developing countries. But, as Ganesh and Barber (2009) point out, research in this

field continues to conceptualize inequality in technology use in utilitarian terms, believing that 'all that is required is to reach out and provide access' (p. 857). Utilitarian approaches often obscure the importance of skills and norms of behavior in different contexts, encouraging the replication of dominant material infrastructures rather than fostering 'the substantive freedoms—the capabilities—to choose a life one has reason to value' (Sen, 1999, p. 74). Conceptualizing the digital divide in terms of technological inadequacies also normalizes western development paradigms and positions those who do not fit within the dominant model of technology use as 'lacking' and in need of 'help' (Potter, 2006). Ganesh and Barber (2009) respond to Potter's critique of the digital divide literature by re-positioning their analysis 'from a focus on "What do people need?" to one that asks "What are people saying, and where are they saying it?"' (p. 260). By recognizing the communication that *does* occur, and positioning analysis of how communication technologies are used within a grounded context that acknowledges 'other socio-political influences, spaces, interactions and events; other sources of expertise, knowledge and resourcefulness' (p. 260), research on how social movement participants engage with communication technologies may better reflect actual use rather than the idealized generalities of a global information elite (Ganesh and Stohl, 2010). While these concerns are important in any movement sector, they are of particular interest when dealing with social issues that so starkly differentiate participants based on material access, such as local homeless movements.

Expanding the analysis of technologies of communication beyond just Internet use allows a comparative analysis that can highlight how communicative functions are enacted using different communication tools. We can see, for instance, what kinds of communicative tasks participants engage in, and then identify the tools that are used for those tasks by different segments of the movement. Thus, by surveying the field of *communication*, we can begin to understand the ways that *technology is used* by an array of actors within the issue sector. This paper presents an analysis of a communication oriented participant observation in a local homeless movement, addressing the need for research on the ways that technologies of communication are appropriated and experienced by participants in the

context of organizing a social movement. Specifically, this study is guided by two overarching research

questions: *What strategies do participants in the local homeless movement use to communicate within*

and between constituencies? And *How do participants use technologies of communication in*

implementing these strategies?

Methods: Communication Oriented Participant Observation

In 2008 I conducted nine months of formal fieldwork, negotiating "the boundary between

'field' and 'fieldworker'" as a participant observer (Emerson and Pollner, 2001, p. 241) with a

particular interest in communication processes and practices. Communication oriented participant

observation in homeless organizing was a necessary method for establishing what the key issues were

for organizers, and for understanding how they used communication technologies to contest policies

and practices associated with homelessness. Plows (2008) has argued that a case-based approach to

participant observation is particularly important with social movement research, because it encourages

interaction and immersion in the political project and it can help researchers understand the

experiences of other participants.

One of the central questions in case-based research is how researchers define the boundaries of

a case in ways that are sensitive to social theory and theory development (Lichterman, 2002; Yin,

1984). As Atkinson (1992) notes, '[t]he boundaries of the field are not given,' and are something that is

negotiated both by the fieldworker and the community of interest (p. 9). I chose to use political

campaigns as a lens for understanding how people communicate social change in an urban

environment. However, political movements rarely have a single focus, and during my time in the field

three campaigns existed alongside each other that had significant overlaps in participation. Using a

sampling procedure that was responsive to the social context (Gustavsen, 2003), I participated in two

overlapping campaigns and one direct action tent-city project that served as anchors for collective

action in the local homeless movement.[i] Within each campaign I was further interested in the ways that

participants used communication tools in doing social change work. This focus required a multi-

methods approach for data collection and analysis, combining mediated online archival research with face-to-face participant observation.

Participant observation in the three campaigns involved participation in organizing and attending events and meetings, informal discussions with participants, jotting and writing up field notes, and semi-structured one-on-one and small group interviews. All meetings and events were open to public participation where I made my role as a researcher known. To the best of my knowledge, my presence as an activist and a researcher was generally accepted and appreciated. Informal conversations took place using a convenience sample of visibly engaged and willing participants present during organizing meetings, at rallies or living at the tent-city. The 30 interview participants represent a diverse sample of backgrounds, housing status, and activity level.[ii] Participants were treated as experts in their field and interviews followed a semi-structured format (Mishler, 1986) focused on questions related to communication and collaboration processes.

I also engaged as a participant in mediated communication of importance to each campaign, but rather than starting with mediated artifacts and moving towards offline interaction (Howard, 2002), I based my sampling procedures for online communication on offline participation. Mediated texts were identified and collected both in the field (at demonstrations, meetings, public hearings, in conversation), online using keyword searches of regional news media, government sites, and advocacy organizations, and through the news.google.com search site. Search terms utilized for identifying texts for inclusion were 'sweeps' AND 'homeless'; 'Nickelsville'; 'new' AND 'jail' AND 'Seattle'. Materials collected through these methods included flyers, newsletters, newspaper articles, radio stories or programs, email and mail correspondence, meeting minutes, web pages, testimony to city council, laws or resolutions, petitions, photos, and videos. Field-notes, interviews, and communication texts were then read and analyzed using a process of inductive thematic analysis (Emerson *et al.*, 1995; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002) to identify themes that were important to the ways that participants used and understood different communication tools. In what follows, I present some context to homelessness in

Seattle, briefly describe the three campaigns analyzed here, and then present my analysis of the communication strategies that organizers used in producing the local homeless movement.

Context of the Present Study: Issue and Cases

The United States has the highest level of inequality of any country in the world (Massey, 2008), with almost 37 million people living in poverty, and between 2.3 million and 3.5 million people experiencing homelessness in a given year (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2008).[iii] On one night in 2009 in Seattle 2,515 people slept in emergency shelters, 3,293 in transitional housing, and 2,826 people were counted sleeping outside or on busses in the greater metropolitan area – around 8,500 people (Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness, 2009). The enumeration of homeless people has been met with two policy trends: the reduction of funding for services and emergency shelters, and the proliferation of anti-vagrancy laws in urban centers. First, federal funding for low-income housing fell 56% from 1976 to 2007 (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2008), and the funds that are available have largely been directed towards long-term housing development projects. The primary vehicle for this change in funding policy has been city-based '10-year plans to end homelessness' developed in over 300 US cities. Seattle implemented its 10-year plan in 2004, with a commitment to 'ending homelessness by 2014' (Committee to End Homelessness in King County, 2005). Despite the role of housed and unhoused homeless advocates in ensuring that the plan addressed a commitment to 'interim survival mechanism—services focused on keeping people alive…until time that affordable permanent housing is available to all' (Committee to End Homelessness in King County, 2005, pg. i), the city of Seattle has consistently reduced funding for emergency shelter and social services, and critics charge that the few mixed-use condo projects that the city has funded have resulted in a net loss of affordable housing. Second, in the management of homeless populations, city governments have enacted no-sit/no-lie ordinances, anti-loitering laws and laws aimed at making arrests for 'aggressive' panhandling (Mitchell, 1997), and Seattle is among the many major cities that have chosen to accompany these laws with an increase in the number of police on the street. As a

result, those experiencing homelessness are less able to find adequate emergency shelter, and are

confronted with the increasing criminalization of their survival behavior.

Three distinct campaigns emerged as prominent foci of contentious activism around

homelessness in Seattle. First, the city's campsite clearance policy gave rise to a dynamic campaign to

'*Stop the Sweeps*' of homeless campsites in urban spaces. This campaign involved a series of overnight

'campouts' on the steps of city hall where housed and unhoused participants slept in tents pitched on

the concrete and distributed 'survival gear' to those who had lost their tents and sleeping bags to the

city's 'sweeps.' Second, campers and homeless activists developed a pro-active response to the lack of

adequate emergency shelter in the city by starting a direct action style 'self-managed' tent-city

averaging 70-100 residents called *Nickelsville*, with the long term goal of creating a permanent 'shanty-

town' of up to 1,000 people within the city limits. The camp occupied several city and state-owned lots

illegally, and was subsequently invited to stay in parking lots owned by a number of local churches.

Finally, the emergence of the city's proposal to build a new misdemeanant jail was taken up as a

homeless issue by area activists, and the '*No New Jail*' campaign became a space where homelessness,

racial profiling and school closures were used as vehicles for deepening the critique and bridging gaps

between constituencies and issue groups. This campaign revolved around signature gathering for the I-

100 ballot initiative that would have required the city to partner with the county in finding alternatives

to the building of a new jail to 'house' misdemeanor offenders. Together, these three campaigns served

as anchors for action on homelessness, as well as important cultural referents within the urban

communication space.

Analysis: Communication Technologies in Homeless Organizing

In analyzing the role of Internet communication technologies in a regional homeless

movement, I assessed the range of communicative tools that participants used in the process of

organizing. That preliminary analysis focused on the tools themselves – both old and new, mediated

and face-to-face – as well as the ways that the tools were used in context. What I present here are four

themes of central importance to understanding how participants in the homeless issue sector did and did not use information communication technologies.

Organizing Without ICTs: Emphasizing 'Relational' Face-to-Face Communication

Organizing around homelessness in Seattle was often talked about as something that was built on interpersonal connections and face-to-face relationships. While this is true of other issues, participants talked about how, when 'organizing across class,' it was particularly important to personalize relationships between people who are and are not housed. Participants called this approach 'relational organizing,' and several organizations established communications infrastructures (events, meetings, selling the street newspaper *Real Change News*) that fostered skills in this area. This was especially true among people who were experiencing homelessness, and within organizations run by this portion of the movement.

One reason for this emphasis was on the perceived need to work across difference in order to break down stereotypes around class and homelessness, combined with the belief that mediated forms of communication were inadequate to the task. When interviewing campers at *Nickelsville* I would often ask what people could do to help, and many would respond with calls for people to 'Come on down! Come talk to us.' The invitations for people to visit the camp were repeated to visitors, and in discussions about neighbors in the many communities that *Nickelsville* resided in. Often the ramifications of someone 'visiting' the camp were implied: interacting with people experiencing homelessness and being in a camp that was 'clean and safe' would lead to changes in a visitor's perceptions about homelessness and what the possible solutions for the lack of adequate shelter might be. However, this dynamic was also explicitly articulated within the Real Change Empowerment Project (RCEP) community. Richard White was a *Real Change News* vendor who lived in Woodland Park, and had worked on all three of the campaigns described in this article.[iv] He talked about his work as an organizer in terms of individual impact, and face-to-face connections. Sometimes those interactions happened while selling someone a paper, but they also happened at events, in what Richard

referred to as 'chance encounters.' I asked him if he 'talked to those people later on about getting involved?'

> Actually, those conversations quickly turn to friendships. Quickly. When, when they had that personal interaction and the stereotypes that people have inside of their heads quickly fold away, quickly fall away, people's perceptions change quickly. That one-on-one contact is the most important thing – that individual contact. (White, interview with author, 2008)

In this interview excerpt Richard emphasized the importance of individual interactions with other people in the kind of work that he did: 'that one-on-one contact is the most important thing.' This is perhaps not surprising given that Richard had limited *access* to ICTs on a daily basis. In addition to computer access at public libraries, Richard's status as a *Real Change News* vendor granted him access to the RCEP computer lab (a series of six computers with Internet connections and a phone). But even though Richard had a level of access greater than many people experiencing homelessness, he did not work behind a desk and did not own a laptop or cell phone. Rather he worked on the street, talking with the people who bought his paper or the campers he shared his corner of Woodland Park with. His work as a vendor and as an organizer among people in the informal street networks of Seattle had helped Richard develop his communication *skills* in the context of 'chance encounters' with strangers and recurrent interactions with friends – contexts that privileged face-to-face communication strategies over those mediated by ICTs.

In addition to the perceived value of face-to-face communication in breaking down stereotypes, organizers were well aware of the material constraints that people often experience when they live on the street, in a shelter, or in a tent-city. A 2006 study of 265 shelter residents in California found that, while 55% of respondents had used a computer at least once, regular use was extremely low, with only 10% sending or receiving email, and 19% accessing information on the Internet in the previous 30 days (Redpath et al., 2006). As Redpath et al. conclude, and the homeless organizers I talked to corroborate, reaching people experiencing homelessness was not

effectively done via the Internet, and ICTs were not preferred by organizers experiencing

homelessness in facilitating communication tasks. Indeed, when organizing people experiencing

extreme poverty it was often best to meet them where they were at, and provide them with

opportunities to contribute to political action in ways that were familiar to them and in which they

were most confident. This is not to say that ICTs were not used in organizing participants, but that

their *use* needs to be understood in the context of *non-use* (Ganesh and Stohl, 2010), that

participants made conscious decisions about what communication practices to employ, and that

this split is a dynamic that speaks to the highly classed nature of technology use and access

(Perrons, 2004; Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007).

ICTs and Brokerage: Connecting with Housed Allies

The political marginality of poor people within the urban political city-scape requires that

homeless organizers collaborate with housed allies in building a strong base of political support for

projects that are often standing on precarious material foundations. This imbalance of power

complicated brokerage tasks for local organizers, where interactions with churches, non-profits, and

city officials bumped up against the ways that people experiencing homelessness organized themselves

in 'self-managed' shelters and tent-cities.

Homeless organizing in Seattle benefited from a legacy of organizing efforts that started in the

early 1990s and resulted in the SHARE/WHEEL community of 'self-managed' shelters and tent cities

(Seattle Housing and Resource Effort and their sister organization Women's Housing, Equality and

Enhancement League ran 30 shelters in the city). Rather than the more common relationship of

paternalistic charity that professionally managed shelters and food-banks typically establish (Cloke et

al., 2005), SHARE/WHEEL and *Nickelsville* put direct control of all collective affairs in the hands of

residents. As one veteran organizer put it,

You don't help somebody get control of their lives by taking more control of their lives

away from them, you, you help by actually putting them in control of something and

supporting them while they, you know, improve in that… (Freeman, interview with author,

2008).

But SHARE/WHEEL shelters were hosted by churches and non-profits, and Nickelodeons (as

residents of the camp called themselves) relied on housed allies to donate supplies, help with moves

and to increase their numbers during the many raids, or 'sweeps,' that the camp was subjected to as a

result of their legal predicament. And just as organizing among people experiencing homelessness was

best done using face-to-face communication tools, organizing housed allies relied far more on

technologically mediated ones.

Nickelsville made more extensive use of websites and email than other self-managed projects in

the area had previously done. NickelsvilleSeattle.org was up and running before the first tent was

pitched, and went through several iterations over my time in the field. My own heavy use of online

communication tools as a graduate student meant that email alerts and website updates were an

important part of my staying connected to campaign developments as a housed ally. Scott Morrow was

well aware of the need to meet people where they were at. Scott had been organizing people

experiencing homelessness for 20 years in Seattle, and as the one paid staff for *Nickelsville*, he played a

bridging role between Nickelodeons and housed allies facilitated by email and cell phone use.

And, you know, my practice as an organizer has been to be the person responsible for

sharing information with the wider community which at *Nickelsville* at this point is those

nightly meetings. So I try to get information that they need to make good decisions and

share it with them at the nightly meeting which is why I have a cell phone to do that. And

then the other component of *Nickelsville* that I've never, you know, been around before, is

people who aren't homeless, who have been really supportive and the communication with

them. A lot of it has been through our website and Internet alert system and I didn't have – I

didn't know how to use the Internet three or four weeks ago, and it's totally new to me how

to communicate with people who want to help in the wider community through the

Internet. (Morrow, interview with author, 2008)

Scott served a crucial communication role for Nickelsville, connecting the nightly camp meetings,

the weekly organizing meetings, and the broader SHARE/WHEEL community with allied

activists, churches, journalists, and political officials. But rather than speaking *for* Nickelodeons,

Scott played an advisory and secretarial role, presenting decisions that the group had made in face-

to-face meetings via email, website, or phone and re-iterating discussions or email interactions

back to the group during camp meetings.

Cell phones, while the most common personal ICT among people experiencing

homelessness, were typically pre-paid (when funds allowed) and rarely had smart phone

capabilities. Organizations like RCEP or SHARE/WHEEL provided access and guidance for

homeless participants in using phones and computers for organizing tasks, but key organizers with

greater access and skill ended up playing important brokerage roles between constituencies and

across technologies. Michele Marchand, a veteran organizer for WHEEL, talked about some of the

difficulties that this created for her as a communication broker with 'outsiders looking for the boss

person to talk to and make a quick decision.'

People are really confounded when they get me on the phone, and, uh, I say, 'well I can't

make that decision, I've got to give it to the group, you know, I'll raise your issue with

them, or, you know, see if they will meet with you in person, but it's their decision to

make.' So number 1, they can't get someone immediately to make that decision for them,

and number 2, they have to wait because WHEEL only meets once a week, on

Mondays…but those meetings are binding, decision making meetings… (Marchand,

interview with author, 2008)

Bridging the gulf between the communication tools used in self-managed homeless-led projects with those used by housed advocacy and ally groups was also facilitated by individuals that were active in multiple groups. Peggy Hotes, a *Nickelsville* resident and tireless organizer was active in connecting *Nickelsville* to (housed) ally groups.

> So yeah, we use email alerts…And we also asked people at rallies and who were at meetings and so on. "Please! Send on to your list so we can multiply this." So I sent it out to…Veterans for Peace and my Evergreen Peace and Justice. So it got sent to lots of people that way. And people could sign up for individual email alerts… (Hotes, interview with author, 2008)

Peggy, a member of *Nickelsville*, was active in Veterans for Peace, and Evergreen Peace and Justice prior to her role at *Nickelsville*, and she used this involvement to bring her activities in *Nickelsville* to the other two organizations by forwarding messages from *Nickelsville* to their organizing lists, and by attending meetings and giving updates to other members about what was going on with the camp. Peggy effectively brokered ties between organizations through co-membership status and use of organizationally sponsored communication tools, and as the demands of living at *Nickelsville* and maintaining a full time job as a special education instructor reduced her ability to attend meetings with other groups, email served as a low-cost alternative to maintaining inter-group ties.

Research on brokerage between organizations and communities in social movements has suggested that use of Internet communication tools enables individuals to act as brokers where organizations had previously been central to this process (Bennett, 2003a; Bimber et al., 2005). In the context of homeless organizing, I found that individuals did indeed play an important role in brokering constituencies by cross membership in multiple activist communities. However, this brokerage was done in the context of organizational affiliation, and often by using organizationally produced and maintained resources like email lists. This finding is in line with Ganesh and Stohl's (2010) study on Internet use among anti-globalization activists in New Zealand, where they suggest that activists 'were

'organizational entrepreneurs' in their brokerage activities insofar as they simultaneously represented established organizations even as they constructed newer, smaller, less formal organizing structures' (p. 60). I found that the participation profiles of many homeless organizers allowed them to bridge multiple organized groups in spreading information and mobilizing support for homeless issues. Rather than the withering of formal organizations, the brokerage activities of individuals relied heavily on the communications infrastructure established by formal organizations in performing brokerage tasks, while using organizational affiliation as shorthand for describing their own and other's positionality within the movement.

Fostering Participation with ICTs: Moving From Screen to Street

The homeless organizers I spoke with suggested that Internet technologies could provide easy entry for those who made frequent use of the web, but clear differences were articulated between 'armchair activists' and 'committed soldiers for the cause.' As other research has shown, the kinds of participation that online communication tools enable tend to be characterized by short term, and relatively shallow levels of commitment (Earl, 2006; Flanagin *et al.*, 2006). Ganesh and Stohl (2010) found that organizers often think of online communication tools as less substantive, with one of their interview respondents commenting that '…if it is virtual, then maybe that commitment isn't there…' (p. 62). Wall (2007) also points out the limitations of Internet communication technologies in her research on email lists of importance to the 1999 WTO protests, suggesting that 'social movements require a level of participation, commitment and trust that Internet communication does not always create' (p. 274). The homeless activists that I worked with had a similar assessment of Internet technologies, and responded by focusing their use of mediated technologies on getting people off the computer and into face-to-face settings where they could develop a deeper commitment to the issues and to each other, something that several scholars have found to be an important part of how activists use new media (Fisher and Boekkooi, 2010; Fisher et al., 2005).

As the motto of the free email provider that hosts the RCOP email list suggests (see riseup.net: 'Get off the internet, I'll see you in the streets!'), many people were skeptical of the effectiveness of online activism, and instead talked about how effective email and websites were in getting people to come out to actions and show up at meetings. Anitra Freeman, a self-proclaimed 'techie,' a member of the *Real Change News* editorial board, and a homeless activist who spent many years in self-managed shelter reflected on a discussion she had with other area homeless activists about how the Internet was used in movement building.

> …when I said that the face-to-face relationships are, are important they said "yeah but the Internet helps you get to the meeting point where you can have the, the face-to-face relationships." So…for both homeless and housed people the Internet put out the word that you know here's where we can meet…but the…face-to-face relationships are the movement building [aspect]... (Freeman, interview with author, 2008)

As a former computer programmer, Anitra struggled with wanting to do everything online, but she had learned that 'a movement comes out of relationships with people over time' and that this was not something that could easily be done online. Tim Harris was an early adopter of the Internet, creating the first website for *Real Change News* in 1996, but he also expressed doubts as to how effective 'Internet based activism' was for 'movement building.'

> …I mean, there is an upside to Internet based activism in that, you know, it makes political mobilization very expedient and easy, you know, you press a button, you set up a democracy in action email, people, you know, click on a button and a form letter gets sent, um, but that doesn't build movements. I'm not even sure it accomplishes much of, of anything, and I think that, um, you know, to some extent it actually offers the illusion of, of organizing, and, and effectiveness, um, so, you know, my take is that, you know, to the extent that you can do things like, um, organize things like tent cities at City Hall, you know, our overnight encampments that we've been doing quarterly, um, but those are

enormous opportunities for movement building and creating commitment and

understanding, and, sort of, gut level investment in the issue where, where people really

become, sort of, committed soldiers to the cause… (Harris, interview with author, 2008)

While RCEP made extensive use of online communication tools in their organizing work, Tim

expressed a common sentiment that such activities, while they may make political mobilization 'very

expedient,' they may also 'offer the illusion…of organizing, and effectiveness,' and that 'movement

building' really only happened through events and direct actions 'like tent cities at City Hall.'

Organizations and ICTs: Using Existing Communications Infrastructure

While it is often noted that activist projects seem to suffer from a perpetual shortage of material

resources and an abundance of activities and events demanding their attention, this dynamic is only

exacerbated within a community characterized by material poverty (Cress and Snow, 1996). As we saw

in participant's strategies for mobilizing housed ally support, existing organizations were important

resources that were mobilized for a variety of movement needs. As *Nickelsville* developed its

organizing structure and called for participants to join as campers it drew heavily on the institutional

knowledge of the existing SHARE/WHEEL community, and spread word of the camp through the

informal 'street networks' that groups like SHARE/WHEEL and RCEP helped to foster. Similarly, the

mediated communications infrastructure that RCEP had developed over the years was mobilized for

the distribution of information about all three campaigns, in mobilizing support, and in calling on

supporters to step outside their homes and into the streets, halls, or camps that were the site of co-

present action. The reliance on existing organizations to distribute the load in mobilizing activities

points to the continuing relevance of organizations and material resources to social movements. Work

in this area has emphasized the role of organizational resources (both internal and external to the

movement) in structuring the opportunities for action that movements are presented with and in

constraining the parameters of collaboration in resource-poor contexts (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and

Zald, 1977). However, rather than a shortage of resources resulting in competition within the field

(Barman, 2002), mobilization within the homeless sector was more accurately reflective of a

relationship of collaboration where organizations focused their work on areas where they held

expertise, seeing their contributions as necessary but insufficient to the whole (Levitsky, 2007).

Social movement communication within the local homeless movement was characterized by

diffused distribution patterns that made use of a range of existing communication infrastructures that

were differently accessible to both current and potential participants. Often these communication

venues would reach relatively small segments of the overall population and target a demographic that

was already politically active on progressive issues, as was the case with the Veterans for Peace email

list serve. However, several of the tools that served to facilitate communication within and about the

homeless movement in Seattle targeted a population that, while not already movement participants,

were interested enough in their neighborhood to read and write about issues that affected them and

their neighbors: namely, neighborhood blogs.

Two of the campaigns discussed in this paper were of particular interest to people writing in

neighborhood blogs. First, the debate about where to build a new jail in Seattle was something of great

interest to citizen journalists in the neighborhoods where proposed sites were located. Highland Park, a

predominantly minority and poor community bordering the Duwamish industrial area in South Seattle

was particularly vocal about the impact that a new jail would have on their neighborhood, and the West

Seattle Blog became a place where participants in the *No New Jail* campaign could go to find listings

of upcoming events and text or video reports of past events related to the jail issue. Second,

Nickelsville also became an object of interest to neighborhood bloggers. As a project that occupied

physical space in a visible and controversial way, people from across the political spectrum wrote

about the impact that *Nickelsville* had on their community, providing updates for their readers on legal

developments and on the campers themselves. As the camp moved from neighborhood to

neighborhood, people writing in these blogs sometimes visited the camp to take photographs, shoot

videos, and talk with participants. In one neighborhood where *Nickelsville* occupied four separate

locations, the West Seattle Blog provided readers with updates on upcoming events and activities that

they could participate in, sometimes with multiple updates during the events themselves.

> "Nickelsville": What's next, and what the sweep was like…We haven't been back yet
>
> tonight, but by all accounts, some of those who were camping on city land till police swept
>
> the site this afternoon are now on adjacent state land - this is still all part of the potential
>
> city jail site at Highland Park Way/West Marginal - and have a few days grace period
>
> there…This afternoon, we reported on the sweep as it happened, and finally tonight have
>
> finished going through our video and photos to create a diary of sorts, in case you are
>
> interested in seeing more of what it was like:… (West Seattle Blog, communication text
>
> archive, 2008)

Here, this West Seattle Blogger provided a 'report back' to the neighborhood about the 'sweep' of

Nickelsville and the subsequent move, connected *Nickelsville* to the 'potential jail site,' and provided a

second update later in the day with a video and photo 'diary' of the individual's personal experiences

during the day. Through this medium, readers not already involved in homelessness or activist

activities became aware of the efforts of participants and were sometimes drawn in as participants in

their own right, bringing food or clothing, participating in solidarity activities during camp raids and

arrests, or simply stopping by to talk with campers.

In addition to tools focused on geographic proximity, the communications' infrastructure of

organizations sharing issue interests were an important part of how participants communicated with

each other in the regional homeless movement. The importance of RCEP to the local homeless

movement cannot be overemphasized here, and participants in the field often referred to the

organization as a 'communication specialist.' They deployed their communication resources for

different purposes during the period of my fieldwork, depending on the focus of the homeless

activist community at the time. After about nine months of work on the *Stop the Sweeps* campaign,

RCEP began to shift its focus towards the *No New Jail* campaign only to drop both projects for

several weeks when *Nickelsville* started. RCEP published editorials about *Nickelsville*, printed off

inserts for the paper, and supplied vendors with flyers to distribute to their readers with a map and

a list of needed donations. As Taylor Cuffaro, an organizer with RCEP, told me in an interview,

'we're really lucky to have the newspaper that is read by, what, 60 thousand people…so we can

just go to the editorial staff and say hey, we want to put an ad in this week and their like "all

right"…' (Cuffaro, interview with author, 2008). The paper used a distribution strategy common to

street papers – it was only available from vendors who sold it on the street – and many vendors

saw this commercial interaction as an organizing opportunity, plugging events and issues like

Nickelsville to their readers.

Building on their street newspaper readership, RCEP also developed an online communications

infrastructure that they used for organizing that included an online version of the newspaper

(realchangenews.org), a weekly story summary email list (This Week in Real Change), a political

action announce list (through democracyinaction.salsa.com), and an organizational wiki

(realchange.wikispaces.com); as well as an RCOP website (r-cop.org), a blog

(realchangeorganizingproject.blogspot.com), an organizing wiki (rcop.wikispaces.com), and a

(riseup.net) discussion list. Several people associated with RCEP also produced their own personal

blogs that focused on homelessness and social justice in Seattle (apesmaslament.blogspot.com was the

most prominent). As Tim Harris explained,

> …we have that institutional capacity for organization, for, for mobilization because, um,
>
> we've used the newspaper as a means of, um, capturing the information of people who are
>
> interested in taking action on political issues and mobilizing those, and, and, and, you
>
> know, putting together a fairly large database… (Harris, interview with author, 2008)

RCEP sent out 'email blasts' using their database of readers and supporters, wrote blog posts, and

produced short videos about *Nickelsville*, expanding the public profile of the campaign.

Organizationally sponsored communication resources were invaluable in providing a communications infrastructure to people organizing around homelessness, and they were able to be mobilized by participants without investing time and energy in building new infrastructure or popularizing its use. However, these resources facilitated participation and voice differently based on how directly those experiencing homelessness were involved in re-producing them. Self-management was an effective strategy for empowering those experiencing the problem to act for themselves, but organizations like RCEP chose to professionalize routine tasks, and relied instead on advisory mechanisms like their editorial board for ensuring their connection to those directly affected by homelessness. In these cases, directness of voice was traded for genre conformity and institutional credibility. The three campaigns examined here provided opportunities for these organizational resources to converge in a shared issue space, creating moments of public visibility and political power.

Conclusion: Technologies of Communication and Contexts of Use

ICTs are an increasingly important part of the communication repertoire of organizers in North American social movements (Bennett, 2003a; Owens and Palmer, 2003). However, rather than present the role of ICTs as the harbinger of a new era in collective action (Castells, 2001), this analysis highlights the contingent relationships that many organizers have with the technologies by specifying some of the ways that activists used communication tools in doing social change work. By respecting the contexts in which ICTs are used – and not used – we are able to understand more fully the relationships that organizers and activists have to ICTs specifically, and communication practices more broadly (Ganesh and Stohl, 2010).

This paper presents several key findings that should be of interest to practitioners and scholars in the field of political communication. First, even in the context of an increasingly mediated society like the United States, face-to-face interaction remains invaluable to organizers seeking to establish ties between dissociated social groups – in this case, categories around class and housing status – and

engage participants of meager economic means. ICT development and use are fundamentally

structured by systems of wealth stratification, meaning that their deployment by organizers is

frequently couched within a broader analysis of participation demographics. Face-to-face

communication tools (in the form of meetings, protests, and one-on-one interactions) continue to be

most valuable in contexts where significant differences among participants threaten individual and

organizational identification with an issue area, and where participants have widely differing levels of

access to ICTs. Second, a range of mediated communication technologies can be used in reaching ally

populations, with the key here being the flexible use of communication tools in reaching people in the

formats that they use in their daily lives. For participants in the local homeless movement, the 'old'

strategies of building relationships across difference were of central importance to effective organizing,

and were not replaced by 'new' forms of organizing that relied exclusively on Internet technologies.

Rather, the appropriation of technologically mediated communication tools allowed participants to act

as brokers between dissociated constituencies (Bennett, 2003a), connecting the face-to-face self-

managed community to the housed ally community who often relied more heavily on Internet

technologies in their political lives. Third, ICTs are important resources for getting online adherents to

offline action (Fisher and Boekkooi, 2010; Fisher et al., 2005). While scholars have pointed to how

Internet technologies are being used to develop new low-cost forms of action (Earl, 2006), getting

people to turn out to face-to-face interactive settings like meetings, protests, or public hearings was

seen as fostering the kinds of deeper commitment that could sustain participation and build a successful

movement. This suggests that, even while activists made extensive use of online organizing tools, their

understandings of what made a movement happen were closely tied to 'relational' organizing and co-

presence. As Anitra Freeman put it, 'a movement comes out of relationships between people…'

(Freeman, interview with author, 2008), and those relationships were seen as created through face-to-

face interactions. Finally, organizational specialization within a movement can reduce the resources

necessary to mobilize campaigns and projects by responding to political opportunities in flexible ways.

While Internet technologies have the potential to replace formal organizations in brokering ties between disparate constituencies (Bimber et al., 2005), the tools most commonly used in these three campaigns were ones developed and maintained by formal organizations of the sort resource mobilization scholars have attributed so much importance to (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). When it comes to the facilitation of communication tasks associated with participant mobilization, organizations were of central importance in developing and maintaining political communication infrastructures (both 'old' and 'new') even as individuals appropriated them in the course of organizing activities.

The analysis presented here is limited in two ways, related to my sampling strategy and research methodology. First, this study is concerned with a local, single issue movement. As such, implications about how organizers used ICTs in mobilization processes may be limited both by geographic scale and location, and by issue breadth and focus. However, the majority of research on ICTs and movement organizing has been focused on transnational activism (Bennett, 2003b; , 2005; della Porta *et al.*, 2006), or organizing at the national level (Fisher and Boekkooi, 2010; Simone, 2006), so the limitations of a local geographic focus may be adequately countered by its advantages. Second, the focus of my analysis here is on understanding the experiences of organizers, and the ways that they thought about their use of ICTs. As such, I am less concerned with counting the prevalence of one communication tool over another, and more concerned with building social theory through a contextualized analysis of the social experiences of organizers. Further research in this area might benefit from the quantification of communication texts, highlighting, for instance, the prevalence of particular communication tools or linguistic features in the sample.

As this analysis has shown, research on technology use in social movements can benefit from a broadening of the lens beyond just the use of ICTs by the technological activist elite. By focusing first on communication strategies within a movement sector, and second on how a range of activists use

ICTs alongside other communication tools in implementing these strategies, we can more fully

understand how and why technologies are and are not used in the process of organizing a movement.

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[i] For the purposes of this paper, I refer to the direct action tent-city project as a campaign as it bears many but not all of the attributes often associated with political campaigns. This paper presents data that was developed through a participant observation as approved by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division (# 34550).
[ii] All interview participants were given the option of being fully identified, choosing a pseudonym, or being anonymous. One participant chose to be anonymous, two asked that only their first names be used, and the remainder chose to have their full names used. Many participants felt socially marginalized and appreciated the opportunity to share their experiences. I am humbled by the many people I worked alongside during my fieldwork and present their names here as a way to recognize their substantive contributions to this paper as "movement intellectuals" (Eyerman & Jamison 1991).
[iii] The Seattle/King County Coalition for the Homeless (SKCCH) relied on over 800 volunteers to count people sleeping outside or on busses in Seattle in January of 2009. While the number of people on the streets in the city of Seattle rose less in 2009 than in 2008, south King County saw a 68% increase – a change some attribute to Mayor Nickels' homeless encampment 'sweeps' policy driving people out of locations closer to food and services for low-

income citizens. It should be noted that there is much disagreement on how best to count a population that often relies on invisibility as a mechanism for survival, as the counting of populations has significant political implications (Wagner 1993). Rather than a conclusive count, these numbers are intended to provide readers with a reference for the general size of the population.

[iv] RCEP publishes a 'street paper' called *Real Change News* that is sold on the street by vendors who purchase the paper for thirty five cents and sell it for a dollar. They also house a political action group called the Real Change Organizing Project (RCOP).