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GRASS ROOTS CAMPAIGNING AS ELECTIVE SOCIALITY (OR MAFFESOLI MEETS 'SOCIAL SOFTWARE'): LESSONS FROM THE BBC iCAN PROJECT

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This paper is based on ethnographic research during the development phase of the BBC iCan website. It discusses how we defined the object of study that would become the focus of the site – "grass roots campaigning" and how following two stages of research we found the site's early planning (influenced by the 'social software' movement) needed to recognize the deeply contextual nature of this practice – and avoid attempting to mediate the majority of a campaign online. Working with Maffesoli's theories of 'sociality'; we understood grass roots campaigns to be rooted in experiential "being together" and less 'individual' and 'political; than commonly perceived.

PROLOGUE

I begin here as we began our project:

> *We look for the political in the wrong places, on the wrong pages of the newspaper…Those decision-making areas which had been protected by 'the political' in industrial capitalism – the private sector, business, science, towns, everyday life and so on – are now caught in the storms of political conflict…It is no exaggeration to say that citizen-initiative groups have taken power politically.* (Beck, 1994:18).

These words evoke epochal change. Since they import a necessary tone of drama into proceedings, they were good for kicking-off a project. Every client wants their job to feel more exciting; and we consultants, even ethnographers, usually oblige.

The quote comes from by Ulrich Beck; German sociologist, proponent of the 'Risk Society', and arch-theorist of reflexive modernization. His work and particularly his essay 'The Reinvention of Politics' seemed to thoroughly encapsulate what the iCan project (about grassroots action) was all about. Beck's transformational vision describes the center of politics migrating away from institutions toward the people - its force not declining as commonly believed - but transmuted and re-distributed elsewhere in the social structure. As time went on I came to find this set of ideas limited; good for starting with, but providing little grist for later analysis and interpretation. So the history of this project is also for me the history of a displacement; one theoretical mentor for another (Maffesoli for Beck).

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This paper concerns reflections emerging from ethnographic research during the 'participative development' phase of the BBC iCan website. It is the story of my struggle to describe the nature of popular activism and wrestle this understanding into useful praxis. The paper illustrates: how theory is 'lived' (and avoided) on projects where it is not a focal point; and how theory can get replaced by other forms of knowledge. It is also my contention that this research when joined with the sociological theory of Michel Maffesoli provides the rudiments for a critique of the overly political and functional accounts of grass roots activism that predominate in this area.

From the onset of the project I realized the very object of study had to be rescued from the congeries of meaning that surrounded it. Before deciding the precise grass roots thing we would research, I had to maneuver through entrenched positions of thought that saturated it. On the one hand, the 'spontaneous sociology' of lay opinion understood campaigning as the province of heroic acts and people who were dramatically transformed in the process of standing up for what they believed in. This view of campaigning (distantly derived from Carlyle's 'Great Man' thesis by way of Erin Brokovich) – runs that campaigning, like history, gets its motive force from the extraordinary individuals who push it along. On the other hand, the phenomenon had to be detached from the academics and activists who cast a collectivized version of 'the people' as another kind of hero engaged in realigning the political system from top to bottom. Finally my clients, BBC designers and planners, had their own ideas of this activity deriving from new media 'best practice' and emerging discourses (such as 'social software') within their industry.

Throughout the research work two themes emerged: uncovering the object (of enquiry) and recovering the real (how to work with and address the activity without illusions). This paper explores these themes in relation to grass roots campaigning and concludes with some reflections on praxis.

UNCOVERING THE OBJECT

In research we always begin with objects already defined by others (partially or seemingly exhaustively). A practitioner can accept the pre-given definitions of a focus of study and let this standpoint drive a project's questions, hypotheses, and inevitably condition its conclusions. At its worst, if this stance forecloses any new insights, it can lead to what one business commentator has christened the GIGO effect (Garbage IN, Garbage OUT) (Shapiro, 1998: 125). Or, the researcher can challenge, refine and re-define (mildly or completely) the focus of study hopefully breaking new ground and revealing counter-intuitive findings along the way. This is a strategy philosophers of science have long referred to as 'building the ship while sailing on the sea'. Neither approach has the monopoly on successful research; and most practitioners split somewhere down the middle.

For thinkers like Heidegger, however, the most productive part of any enquiry is the definitional stage at the onset where one carves out the object of study (Heidegger, 1927:41). For him this is because here is where ontology gets implicated: an understanding of *being* is approached through the *beings* we construct to populate the world. In more humble terms, we can say that this is where important things that should be considered get overlooked - there are often not enough 'objects' dreamt in the researcher's philosophy. Here is also where a lot of 'theoretical' decisions get made before anyone thinks they are 'doing theory'. (This recalls another paper in this conference where the author discusses how organizations often decide their 'users' in advance of any research taking place to determine them (see Cohen, 2005, this volume).

On this project, as all commercial ones, we were not engaged with any chimera like 'pure research'. Our stated purpose was knowledge-seeking in support of a web service aimed at an area that had only been partly decided. After registering a decline of interest in national politics and failing to respond quickly to some important local stories; the BBC was planning a new online resource (with the working title iCan) that would be both a listening post allowing it to tap into significant grass roots events (solving their problem) as well as a site for encouraging and enabling 'citizens' wanting to learn or do something about such issues (to address their own needs).

Defining its goals further; the BBC wanted the site to fill a gap and help people in resolving more specific issues than those covered by national broad-based campaign groups; (Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace). In other words, they wanted the site to aim at issues people could notice and start doing something about themselves. *It should be biased toward action.*

So there was a product concept (the iCan service) and a target before there was an object of study; and it was left to the team from Lodestar (the social and cultural consultancy commissioned by the BBC to carry out development research) to further define and substantiate what this should be. We did set sail, while still building our ship; but there was a tangible focus to guide us - local issues and the people engaging with them. We found that the 'space' at which the project planners wanted to aim did exist and was full of activity. Working with BBC journalists and researchers we isolated a list of 12 issues that would give us a wide range of viewpoints into this phenomenon. We were going to focus on the following:

> *Controlling the placement of mobile phone masts, stopping planning permissions for unwanted development, the impact of second homes on affordable housing, the location of refugee asylum centres, roadside speed cameras, building new airports, accountability in NHS healthcare, prostitutes in neighborhood streets, traffic diversion, gated communities, and car congestion charging*

All of which had local 'campaigns' organized around them. But what kind of thing are these? And how are they distinguished from other varieties of participation?

If, defined ideal typically 'politics' is about directing the ongoing maintenance of power or control; then 'campaigning, in contrast, is aimed at effecting outcomes aimed at what are frequently called 'single issues' rather than the structure of power. Large national campaigns on topics like the environment or nuclear power steal the limelight here. If the province of the political is often considered national; which then devolves its institutions down to local levels; 'grass roots politics' is concerned with mobilizing for national parties at a local level or getting people into positions of authority there. This still leaves a space which describes the activities of people, not officials, trying to address issues and remedies still more discrete in time and space.

As we began investigating; we could now define this as our object of study: 'grass roots campaigning' and the web service's key target audiences as 'grass roots campaigners' and would-be campaigners. The BBC was right to realize this was an overlooked and underserved area. And as we found out also poorly understood: the 'third term' or intermediate space between the more glamorous 'national campaigning' and 'grass roots politics'.

We engaged in ethnographic research with the 12 campaign groups in England, Wales and Scotland; choosing them carefully to ensure breadth and diversity: some campaigns had to be complete, some in process, some successes, some failures, etc.

We visited each campaigner or co-campaigners in the place they lived and campaigned; our focus was to capture whole cycles and we actually called our methodology "collecting oral histories of campaigns". A centerpiece of each research encounter was creating with participants a very granular timeline - charting their earliest awareness of an issue, through to the decision to campaign, and all the events that followed that until the campaign's completion (if it was finished). From this we would generate the campaign process model. 1

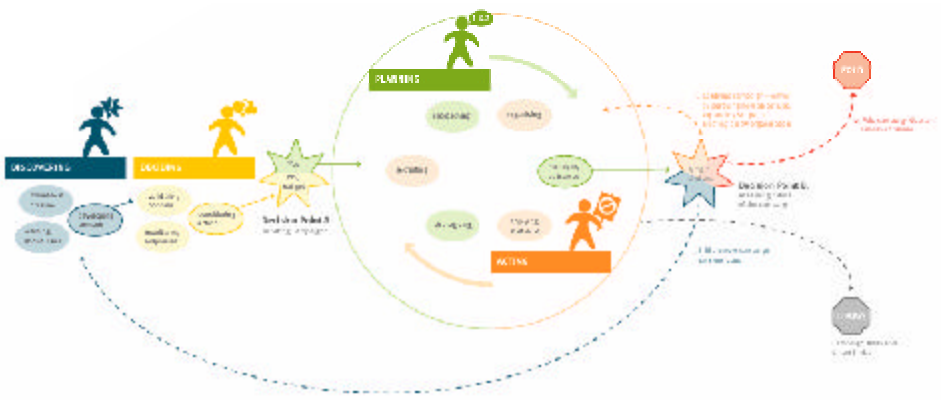

Figure 1 Grass Roots Campaign Process Model (design: Seigfried Herrnreiter)

This research lived up to its expectations; it was received as fascinating and informative by our clients. It had many insights into micro-level local activism. A key one emerging form analyzing the intricacy of the campaigns we modeled was that campaigning is more about late nights in front of a spread sheet or coffee mornings with the neighbors, than manning the barricades. Just as every battle or event has its unsung heroes who are said to tip the balance; the majority of the work of campaigning is accomplished during such 'unsung moments' (literally - ever heard a protest song about typing up a petition?).

As researchers we were exhilarated because we seemed to be getting at the 'reality' of grass roots campaigning. A reality almost eclipsed beneath the romanticization of protests and 'direct action'. For their part the BBC design team was expecting detail so they were especially pleased with the 'campaign process model'. One of their earliest research questions for us was to find out what campaigner's need at various stages of their campaigns. The model with its 4 main stages and multiple sub-stages, fulfilled this request and we knew the new media team planned to design *with* it as a cornerstone of their process.

Not long afterwards we saw the 'system conceptual model' the design team had prepared.. This was one of those crystallizing moments - when the whole ethos behind a project gets revealed at once.

A statement in the diagram read : “What is the journey between being an active user and a passive user?” It appears, the early iCan was re-conceived as a kind of machine to turn timid citizens with vague concerns into full-fledged campaigners - via the alchemy of a host of new media tools. 2

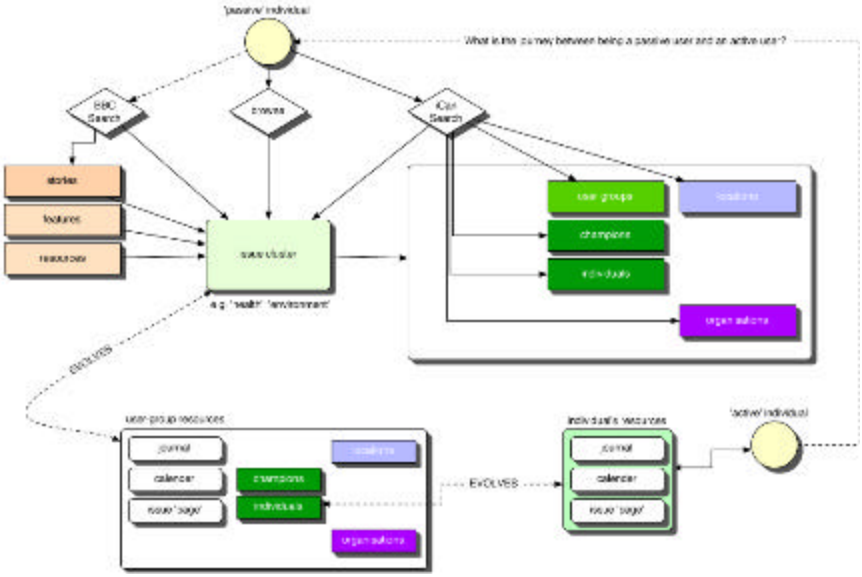

Figure 2. iCan System conceptual model

In the prototype that eventuated from this model, the iCan concept had morphed from its initial modest goals into a one-stop shop “For all your campaigning needs” (as the slogan ran across the homepage). It was to function as a ‘campaign management hub’ where campaigns were created, staffed and directed online. To signal its intention for action the site had a prominent button labeled ‘start campaigning’ on its homepage

When we tested it with users in a second stage of research there was strong interest in the subject of campaigning but almost unanimous rejection of the way the site portrayed and engaged with the practice. One participant said “This site for me would generate constant R.T.F.M. errors (Read The F..king Manual)”. While another dismissed many of its features as “Self-reflexive bollocks”. Almost all the experienced campaigners said the concept site made campaigning look *more* difficult than it actually was. ‘Start campaigning’ and the empty form that followed it was met with universal confusion.

How could research artifacts that were to us so accurate lead our client in the wrong direction for its prototyping? There are clearly some lessons for praxis here which we will reflect on later. In short, the BBC team had interpreted the predominance of ‘unsung moments’ - the daily organizational grind of campaigning - to mean this was the place they should focus the site for users. So they had added core features like organizing meetings online, sending emails and posting strategy ideas to fellow campaigners through the iCan system.

Building on the research from Lodestar, the designers had implicitly assumed a tight correspondence between the detailed stages of the campaign process model and the design of the website; and in addition to the initial bias toward action, we had helped them unknowingly assume a new bias toward comprehensiveness. Together we had made a powerful theoretical decision, without even knowing we had been theorizing.

The prospective 'users' of iCan had also mad e an equally powerful decision: a rejection of the site concept's tendency to totalize the life of a campaign as a new media experience, and as something to be wholly mediated through iCan. In contrast they desired to employ a website only as a sometime resource - favoring to keep the brunt of their campaigning more firmly anchored in the local world that gave birth to it. They equally wished their campaigns to be fed and filtered through multiple sources and means, not dominated by a single conduit.

Yet the research input was not solely responsible for the site concept becoming too overweening and ambitious. Some of this can be attributed to the usual new media 'scope creep', but there was another powerful actor here: Winter 2003 was the rising tide of the 'social software' movement and members of the project team had attended seminars at the BBC with Clay Shirky himself. The ideology of this movement would have communicated that campaigning was just the kind of human activity that could be migrated online and the proposed functions and features list would have been influenced by this climate (as the system conceptual model already showed its hallmark goal of building 'active' online community members). Therefore this 'zeitgeist', should be seen alongside 'data' and 'theory' as another force directing action and decisions in this context, as in so many others.

RECOVERING THE REAL

Campaigning as elective sociality

Two scenes:

January 2002,
Gatley, Stockport
Greater Manchester, England

> *Almost the whole road seems to be in the streets still though it was dusk hours ago.There are people sitting in the road manning the petition table and others milling around waiting. There have been vigils every night this week; but today the surveyors from the phone company came to prepare the site and the residents blocked them from getting through. A lot of people think they may come back tonight, so they're ready. It's cold but they're taking it in turns and the people outside before are now making soup for those still there. Lisa's practically had an open house since she became the campaign HQ. They say the only phone*

> *mast going up around here is that phony one they built over there…*(Informant data, Lodestar research 2003)

August 2002,
Church Lawford,
Near Rugby, England

> *It's another Village Fête day and everyone seems to be having a good time. There are stalls selling jam and cakes. There is a woman turning the tombola for a chance to win a prize and a man selling chances to guess the weight of the cake. Next to him is a table with a big sign behind it with the face of Alistair Darling (the Transport Secretary) and some airplanes saying: Unless YOU Stop Him This Man Will: Destroy our homes, Contaminate our air, Concrete over our heritage…And if they don't stop him there won't be a village left to have the fête next year.*
> (Informant data, Lodestar research 2003)

The preceding sketches are illuminating – they show a glimpse of the everyday world from which campaigns grow. But these scenes could also be misleading. They may suggest grass roots campaigning only emerges from 'traditional communities'; from places where people know all their neighbors and the bonds are very tight. You might believe the phenomenon we are examining is a throwback to the past.

Figure 3 Lisa (far right) and the Gatley anti-pone mast campaigners

But the truth is both Lisa in Gatley and Mark in Church Lawford said they had not known their neighbors very well. "Before there was some small talk in the streets, but now we really know each other afterwards", said Lisa. So grass roots campaigning seems to have contributed more to 'community' in than being a result of it. We must look elsewhere for the forces that brought these people together.

The French sociologist, Michel Maffesoli has created an elaborate narrative about the decline of individualism and the return of a culture of tribes Embedded inside this epochal framework are provocative sociological insights from Weberian and phenomenological perspectives.

> *Society thus understood cannot be summarized by any old rational mechanism; it is experienced and organized, in the strongest sense of the term, through encounters, situations, experiences within various groups to which each individual belongs.* (Maffesoli, 1996: 88)

For Maffesoli "the essential problem of social reality is relationism" (Maffesoli, 1996: 86), not how society as a whole is created – but how the innumerable micro-groups that are continually forming and dissolving come together. Just as 'Time' and 'History' were for Heidegger (1926) abstractions built from the more primordial human experiences of 'temporality' and 'historicality', so for Maffesoli 'society' is a structural abstraction out of our primary experience of 'being-together' with others, which he calls "sociality" and believes is the key attraction of motivating contemporary group formations. But unlike the strong 'social' obligations in traditional community, group allegiance here is a ultimately a matter of choice, hence it is called 'elective sociality'. In this it follows the "logic of the network" rather than that of the clan group.

These ideas resonate with the reactions we received to the iCan prototype. They were getting something out of it beyond the drive toward reaching campaign goals. I started to think that the power of "being-together" could be the charismatic core of these kinds of groups - even if they were ostensibly devoted to serious, 'political' action. Maffesoli had borrowed the term 'syntony' (mutual tuning in relationship) from the phenomenological philosopher Schutz to describe the quality of moments when,

"...individuals in interaction are epiphanized in a vivid presence." (Maffesoli, 1996: 73)

This description matched with stories of group experiences we had collected within the twelve campaigns; about late nights after work spent brainstorming together; about breakthrough moments where the whole strategy of a campaign shifted because a committee of four people seemed to think as one. Sue and Dionne (who campaigned against a refugee center planned for their town) were ten years apart, had never met before; but became fast friends spending nearly every night together: smoking, answering queries on the phone; mobilizing support and planning their next move. Throughout our interview they spoke as one. We as researchers were someone else to win to the cause (like the reporters before us) and they presented a united front, which seemed to go far beyond a presentation.

If this was the quality of collaboration on even some of these campaign, it goes some way toward explaining why the new media campaign experience we were proposing evoked a visceral rejection especially in the more experienced campaigners.

Although Maffesoli does not himself address the issue of local activism; it is my contention that grassroots campaigns are a species of group generated from sociality; and that this description better accounts for the phenomenon than rival 'political' explanations.

The situation in Gatley outside Manchester was that a mobile phone company planned to put a phone mast at the end of a quiet street overlooking a playground. Lisa, our informant noticed the planning application on a lamp post and began to tell other residents of the plans and research the possible effects of living near masts (headaches, sleeplessness) They were especially concerned of any effects on children. She had never been involved in politics or much interested in it .But throughout 15 months of campaigning she acted as defacto leader. There were countless informal meetings at Lisa's house and larger ones in pubs (with 120 attendees); there were newsletters, a march in the street, petition tables and week-long vigils in the road (as described above). All told a lot of 'being-together'. Most of the road's resident's elected to enact their sociality by supporting the campaign. They were united by a common repulsion against the idea of the phone mast.

The issue at hand was even more unequivocal for the residents of Church Lawford. According to government plans to build a new airport outside Rugby, their village would be under a runway (hence the reference to concrete). Obviously this had a mobilizing effect; most locals were appalled at the idea of the destruction of their village. So most supported the campaign with committee members like Mark playing a larger role as its media spokesman. (He had been totally non-political and in his earlier life and was a police officer who required special permission to participate). On call all day every day for the campaign, if the airport plans are shelved, Mark said "He will hang up his campaign hat and *get his life back*."

So we see that campaigning can be a time of collective upheaval but also one of classical" collective effervescence" (Durkheim, [1912] 2001). All the more so for revolving around something more taxing than hobbies, sports or leisure (as Maffesoli's examples tend to run). For the people exposed to this special form of "experiencing the other" (Maffesoli, 1996: 73) campaigning was truly a means of constructing community. All by way of encounters, situations, and experiences within a group to which they would not normally belong. As Lisa attested, life in the neighborhood was not the same afterward.

Maffesoli has a further concept that illuminates the nature of grass roots activism. He believes sociality brings with it a sense a *communalized empathy*" (Maffesoli, 1996[2]:136). I realize this kind of empathy was a catalyst running through the campaigns we studied. Empathy that was no longer person to person, but had become generalized across a locality. Empathy for a common fate that a nearby other is enduring alongside you. Empathy for having to move out of your village, for having a mobile phone mast placed in your road, for having traffic routed into your quiet residential street. If this kind of active empathy is achieved within a collective, it solves a host of traditional political problems at a single stroke (without resorting to the usual 'political' means): from the communitarian dilemma (Sennett, 1998) of how to motivate civic action (by instilling an ethic) to Rousseau's ([1762] 1969) panacea of transforming the 'will of all' into the 'general will' (by suppressing individual self-interest). But such empathy is usually only effective for a very proximate area (within which people can share common experiences) and for one issue (or 'object') at a time. Ergo, this mobilized will cannot be relied upon as the basis for an ongoing political project.

Consequently, for many reasons, I want to question if what we observe in grass roots campaigning is best described as politics at all. Where Beck was correct, in the statement I began this paper with, was in identifying business, science, towns, and everyday life as current hot spots. But he was wrong to proclaim that what motivates people toward such 'sub-politics' – is the desire to get involved in "shaping society from below" or taking part in "the substantive technification and industrialization process" (Beck, 1994:23). This sounds like the objectivist viewpoint of a systems theorist who cannot imagine any motivation outside of the logic of the system. These groups may have encroached on the political sphere because their voices can act as limiting factors on others' decision-making power. But grass roots campaign groups do not want to run or control business, science, towns, or everyday life. Rather they want to defend and respond, or protect and guide certain outcomes in these areas - when the normal political system seems to have impacted on the way they want to pursue their everyday lives. Thus, grass roots campaigning is not so much an extension of the political; of politics reaching down into a subterranean zone as Beck would have it, but a natural extension of the process of 'sociality'; of it electing to reach out and safeguard something it values– be it quiet streets, an uncluttered seafront, or an affordable house in the town where one grew up.

Moreover, this reaching out is something well within sociality's grasp. Neighbors who can plan street parties and raise money for the PTA can likewise organize to prevent a mobile network operator placing a phone mast next to their playground. Viewed this way grass roots campaigning is more like a slight re-focusing of the 'logic of the network' (its members now aggregating to play a new role as campaigners) than any kind of bold transformation of the socio-political structure. The energy that gives rise to it has not migrated from elsewhere a la Beck; and certainly does not entail the people becoming like' little politicians'. Likewise, totally unlike the classic discourse on political activism (Marcuse, 1969), (Huenefeld, 1970); grass roots campaigning does not require its members to be 'politicized', get emancipated, and 'raise their consciousness' (in a jargon which already sounds quaint); or, in short, become a different sort of person than they already are. (This underlines Maffesoli's emphasis on 'roles' rather than essentialised 'identities'). In our understanding of grass roots mobilization– based on attraction, repulsion, and empathy – ideology had little part.

Furthermore, this activity fails to satisfy classic definitions of politics – with a focus on gaining and maintaining power, office or control. (Johnson, 1995) Power in itself is not a goal, and almost never referred to here; although campaigners often want to direct some of its "effects" (Foucault, 1980) towards their areas of concern (or more frequently to block or re-direct some its effects). So to sum it up in Maffesoli's terms,: grass roots campaigning is a phenomenon whereby certain members of the 'mass' that he describes as having "in a quasi-intentional sort of way, as its sole project, its perdurability in existence" join with other members to take the actions they see as necessary (temporarily acting in a *quite intentional* sort of way) to protect the quality of that existence. And then more often than not they return to 'everyday life'. (As Mark talked about hanging up his hat). Additionally, through involvement in a campaigns people reap the benefits of connecting to those around them through "shared sentiments; deepening their ties to 'community' and their chosen sense of identity within it.

This is a description that I believe accounts for the motivations and dynamics of the twelve campaigns we studied in the iCan project. However, Leo from Cornwall (a hairdresser and 31 year old campaigner for affordable housing) who best expresses the ethos of grass roots campaigning when he says, "I never desired to start a group or be part of a movement…I just see things around where I live that need sorting out, and I try to sort them." (Lodestar/BBC, 2003:3)

MAFFESOLI MEETS SOCIAL SOFTWARE

If before we were guilty of somewhat reducing the nature of grassroots campaigning to process we always had the data (as above) to open us to another point of view. Sustained theoretical reflection with Maffesoli had made us realize that while understanding the intricacies of campaigns through our models, we had neglecting to sufficiently take account of their context. Now we were in a better position to 'explain' or at least describe why the iCan concept had been so soundly rejected. This theoretical engagement also furnished us with material to arm our client against the temptations of the zeitgeist that had shaped their approach to this website.

Comparing theory to practice, a striking early discovery was how closely some of Maffesoli's descriptions of sociality overlap with the standard discourse on internet communities (Jones, 1995) (even down to a preference for the network metaphor) (Kelley, 1997). Yet living in this context left our informants unwilling to participate in their campaigning activities through iCan**.** In part, this is to some degree inevitable when translating a group of practices from the 'real world' to 'online' (especially ones that, we found, rely heavily on the charisma of face-to-face interaction.) However, I believe this loss of context was only part of the issue why test users rejected the early iCan prototype. They also seemed to be reacting to a deeper miss-alignment in the very concept of the site.

While seeking to understand the experiences of these differing 'parallel worlds' – campaigning as presented on iCan, versus campaigning as we saw it in localities, I arrived at the following scenarios:

> 'The Social': the campaigner, as an 'individual', is free, contracting, and joining in egalitarian relationships. This forms the basis for the project of politics = iCan campaigning
>
> 'Sociality': the campaigner, as a 'person', is dependant on others, accepts a social context and joins an organic whole = local campaigning

This is adapted from Maffesoli (1994:66, 6) explaining the epochal shift from 'individual' to e 'person' but amounts to a categorical description of the phenomenology of these two approaches to campaigning. The miss-alignment can be explained thus; our users had been acting under the second scenario; then encountered a website built according to the first. In the terms above, the iCan site really was a kind of '*social*' software, whereas what we should have been designing was software for sociality.

For there is no doubt about it, the early iCan concept embodied its own social theory (or 'mental model') based on the first scenario above: free individuals who are registered members were to be given rights on the site; allowed to communicate with others, as long as certain rules are obeyed - no flames – supervised by online moderators. Every member was to be encouraged to create a campaign which had to be founded by someone who was then its 'owner'; who could continue to manage the campaign online; documenting its progress, and communicating with other members.

In the twelve cases we studied, campaigning as we came to understand it, was not only not this direct, coherent or individualized, but was often socially emergent. The campaign duos were compelling evidence of this. Leo and Luke, who had been separately monitoring the housing issue in their town for a year, took letters to the editor of the local newspaper on the same day, expressing

outrage about the lack of affordable housing for young people. They were soon introduced by the paper's reporters and decided to campaign together immediately. Sue and Dionne's collaboration began in similar circumstances, and there were many stories of whole campaign committees that just seemed to organically coalesce.

In 'reality', it is not heroic lone Erin Brockovichs who create the majority of campaigns, but a case where there is an immanent want woven into the situation of a place and time; and several 'persons' or a group (usually on the margins of being in direct relationship) rise out of 'the mass' to take on campaigning as a 'role'.

So the major problem with the iCan concept was not merely that it required doing things through the internet; but that its mechanisms and tone were too functionalist (meaning both too individualistic and too directly political - it made the users feel they would be removing this activity from 'the logic of the network' (e.g. *their* network, Maffesolian definition), and its basis in sociality. While tapping into a 'network effect' (new media definition) was considered of secondary importance, if helpful at a latter stage (many of the campaigns did have their own websites, used for campaign PR not management).

Social software "can be loosely defined as software which supports, extends, or derives added value from, human social behavior - message-boards, musical taste-sharing, photo-sharing, instant messaging, mailing lists, social networking." (Coates, 2005). And it main proponent says succinctly "It's software that supports group interaction." (Shirky, 2003).

Despite all its talk of 'the social', groups, and networks; 'social software' as a body of practices still posits the sovereign individual (as alone as one of Leibniz's monads) ([1712 1965) sitting at the keyboard picking and choosing who to engage with. Social software projects an individualist fantasy of the social, or what one could refer to as 'the social sublime' as it places the torrent of social life safely at a distance - on the terms of the 'user', subject to his control and escape. While promoting the idea of making connections with others, social software, also functions to protect its users *from* the social. To be 'within' sociality is not to have such distance. It's to share common sentiments, empathy or even a common fate with those around you. You may choose whether or not to get involved – but once you are 'in' a group, involved with it you are. Disengaging from sociality is not like getting rid of someone you chatted with on IM, grew bored with, can delete from your addresses and block from messaging you.

In contrast to the social theory conveyed by the prototype site, I believe it was this more embedded experience of 'sociality' (outlined above) that our participant campaigners were embodying when we showed them the ideas for iCan (how you could start a campaign online; or create an 'e-poll' to test your support in advance) and their response was simply to mutter – "But it's not like that…its not like that". For them starting a campaign online would feel like a making a public speech act with no one listening.

The social/political model also introduces a rationalized culture into grass roots campaigns (which are as unlike the traditional 'Robert's Rules of Order' type of association as any group could be). Yet when imagining it transferred to iCan (which like many web services mediates human action through forms, processes and hierarchical procedures) this is what is conjured up and the charisma of campaigning dissipates under it spell.

We must emphasize that for Maffesoli the two scenarios above are not neutral choices. From society to sociality there is historical directionality – our cultures and collectivities, he believes, are moving away from the era of rational individualism toward person-centered absorption into locality and the mass. There is no doubt the internet and new technologies play a large role here (in connecting and consolidating tribes as well as providing them with 'objects' (such as photos or jokes) to coalesce around (Engstrom, 2005) But in the iCan concept we had tapped into the web's most rationalistic potentialities to envisage a service more reflecting the ersatz politics of 'society', than the grass roots 'sociality' of the present. And we had done so despite using the 'latest' technology and being part of one of the newest web crazes of the time (at least for the serious-minded). This uneven development is not surprising when understanding technology change is simple compared to adapting it to how people change (Norman, 1998).

To put it more bluntly, the technology of social software may be state of the art but its social theory is a bit naïve, even untheoretical. Here I am in accord with Paul Dourish, who in a recent paper opined that this movement employs a "highly positivist interpretation of social phenomenon – a sort of social science, perhaps, uniquely attractive to engineers." (Dourish, 2005:1). I think this raises the question of how frequently the people who make appeals to the social in the new technology actually draw on social science (as we practice it) at all. 3

The most cited new works on social networking in the blogsphere; Linked (Barabasi, 2003) and Nexus (Buchanan, 2002) are both by theoretical physicists. These works are significant within our industry context; they fire people up, spawn brainstorm ideas; stimulate new market propositions and later provide a rhetoric of justification for them. This is just part of a long history of technology bypassing our space for the 'harder' sciences. So why are we as ethnographers or interpretive social scientist so often left out of these 'conversations'? Is it simply because our representations of sociality are often too indeterminate, nuanced and troublesome to serve as a rhetoric of justification? Just as on this project *Linked* might have told you the full-strength iCan was a great idea; ethnographic research plus Maffesoli revealed the irritating old-fashioned preference for embodied contexts and face-to face interaction. (Maybe projects cannot bear too much reality?). Yet if we are gaining a greater share of voice in these conversations we must wait see how influential it can become. (EPIC will help the cause).

As well as partaking in the newly-coined zeitgeist of social software, I believe the iCan concept ultimately rested (for its conception of the social) on one of new media's hoariest theoretical fundaments – the perennially under analyzed concept of the "community of interest". For those who have reputedly undergone this 'shift' the activity in question would be just another interest group to take part in. But I believe I have shown the natural ground from which grass roots campaigning arises is 'elective sociality' which in its characteristics occupies an intermediate space between traditional communities and the 'community of interest' (as so described). Therefore a site concept built on the presuppositions of the later would not be expected to complement this practice. In particular such campaigns usually require longer gestation periods; more shared experience, and closer bonds as a threshold compared to many online interest-groups. Again, theory gets done where you least expect it; and while we were seeking to newly define our object, pre-set parameters held sway.

For some e-democracy propositions (such as FaxYourMP.com or Political Compass) the goal of streamlining interaction online with the state political system is the way to go. (This is a classic example of 'National Politics').But we had extended this same approach to an area of very local campaigning that does not conform to the usual definitions of political action or benefit from the same optimizing

logic. Of course there have also been other successful online 'campaigns' as well, such as the celebrated case of Charlene Blake and Chrysler. 5 But this was a patently a campaign that does work via a one-dimensional 'community of interest' (Chrysler owners with defective brakes) and being distributed across the country was key to creating the kind of aggregated power that here effected change (an example of a 'National Campaign' rather than a grass roots one).

Social software may be the best existing technology for building active *online* communities. Instant messaging, photo-sharing, and forums bring the pulse of sociality especially when introduced to a static or editorial-based website. And the movement has helped engender a "resurgence" in this area of technology (Boyd, 2005:1). But as we belatedly realized, the early iCan concept was trying to work in the opposite direction – not adding an element of 'social life' to an online community but extracting a practice that normally grew in embedded contexts and trying to grow it online instead; or transplant existing campaigns there. For *grass roots* campaigning, this would represent not an *intensification* of social activity but a *diminishment* of it.

Once you realize this, it makes the very idea of iCan as a one-stop campaigning hub seem a kind of category error (or misuse of the technology). The realization also begs us to re-consider the idea of tools to support group interaction. To fully recover the real here we have to ask not only what 'supports' an activity; but what supports it most successfully. For grass roots campaigning, we must come to the conclusion that it's not any *software* that best supports it; but rather embodied human *practices* that don't need to involve it - weekly committee meetings, planning brainstorms, vigils. And they support it best in two senses: practically; in achieving campaign goals - they are the most direct and unmediated ways of deciding on issues and making decisions, and morally; they are the kind of practices which consistently generate 'group solidarity'.

This is crucial because the main way campaigns fail is by petering out before reaching goals - owing to members losing motivation. So the most important sense in which you can 'support' a campaign is by *sustaining* it. These practices fulfill this: meet ings, brainstorms, vigils - being together, thinking together, being resolved together. The power of 'vivid presence' and acting in harmony appear the best means to preserve the "communalized empathy" upon which campaigns rest and through which the reciprocal will to continue are reinforced. As much as we love online tools we may have to admit forms of being-together are more 'optimal' for this task. As Maffesoli continually argues against his rationalist colleagues, much of social existence can not be explained by instrumental rationality. (1996, 21). Despite engaging in seemingly goal-oriented, purposeful action, the people involved in grass roots campaigning need to rely on other bases to maintain the effort (the kind of bases only an awkward social scientist might point out when faced with an innovative new technology concept).

It is probable that a grass roots campaign may be an intensely local object that can only have limited parts of it mediated remotely. In this, according to Maffesoli it would simply be partaking in "the spirit of the times" whereby "it is the 'local', the territorial and proxemic that determines the life of our societies" (Maffesoli, 1996, 57). Viewed this way you could say the industry zeitgeist of social software had fallen prey to a far wider one.

REFLECTIONS ON PRAXIS

If it now seems surprising that the iCan concept was working with social software in the reverse direction, viewed from within the new media world it was a perfectly logical extension to make - just

applying the available tools to a new area. Starting from the knowledge that people (who may be isolated or disconnected) have concerns, it seemed to follow that by using the web the BBC could connect them to information, other activists, and give them a online forum to wage their campaign. Nothing could be more simply and efficient.

What explains how this unlikely proposition came to seem so promising is the power of the logic of practice within this design community. The history of this project can be understood more generally as a case where one community of practice imposed its logic on another; even as it was attempting to serve it. If practices have been defined traditionally as skills or habitual tasks vs. a newer conception of them as more creative, construct ive, or improvisational, (Knorr Cetina, 2001: 175) then this difference can be said to correspond to the variations between building a website and conducting a grass roots campaign. The one has its standards, rhythms and routines (including firm timelines and deadlines) as well as its trained professionals. The other is emergent even as a 'community of practice', often populated by first timers trying to learn as they go along and engage their issue for as long as it takes to win. Surprisingly, in this framework the grass roots campaign, not the web design project would be considered the more creative 'epistemic object'; characterized by its open-endedness and 'incompleteness'. Maybe for this reason the attempt to remake it would be inevitable.

For it appears such practices are not equal; the one with more established sense of order seems better able to apply its procedures onto the other. So, for a time the practice of grass roots campaigning was itself re-designed to fit the logic of the web design and tools planned to support it. By the crucial means of the campaign process model that was our prime output we, the researchers, had reshaped one community of practice to fit the functionalist assumptions of the other. There was a messy real-world campaign all laid out in linear stages. Now wonder the team thought all they had to do was design some features to support them all. An outcome Knorr Cetina anticipates when she says "Research work seems to be particular in that the definition of things, the consciousness of problems, etc is deliberately looped through objects and the reaction granted by them" (Knorr Cetina, 2001: 175).

We researchers were so embedded in the new media process that there was a failure of praxis at this point. Rather we were contributing to the process what it wanted of us. Likewise the social logic of grass roots campaigning (which we had studied in depth and context) was initially overlooked allowing it to more closely (if tacitly) fit the prevailing 'community of interest' idea for which the social software tools would have been adequate.

How had these oversights occurred while still delivering work that appeared first class?

We were too focused on our own methodology and techniques

The BBC new media team had requested something like a process model and we knew how to deliver it. In the complexity of projects it is seductive to have an approach that feels cut and dry. But here is a cautionary y tale – to beware methods not grounded in theory and to keep seeing research artifacts in relation to the context out of which they are created. By not doing so, we turned grass roots campaigning into the functionalist object the design process wanted; but not one its 'users' would have embraced.

We paid to much attention to what our clients wanted

Rather than, in classic consultant speak, giving them what they really *needed*. We knew they desired a deep anatomization of the grass roots campaign to flesh out their design and it felt good to be so fully 'looped' into the project. If we had interrogated our data more deeply (in addition to model-

building) after the ethnographic stage we could have offered more designer 'tough love', "But campaigns really don't work like that…" Instead we confirmed their bent toward an all-encompassing solution. (Ultimately amended after prototype testing).

We did not have enough theory

We also did not initially have the right theory (or enough theories) to challenge the power of the new media design process; or to direct us to look in more depth at the places we had forgotten to pay attention - the embedded situations from which campaigns arise. We also had never explicitly theorized the relationship between the research models and the design. I had believed it necessary to employ a 'high theory' to describe grass roots activism (Beck) but had neglected to develop another kind (a human-centered design theory) to explain how to apply our research to the site concept and design.

> *Good training in theory and acquaintance with its latest results is not identical to being burdened with 'preconceived ideas'. If a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless. But the more problems he brings with him into the field, the more he is in the habit of moulding his theories according to the facts, and of seeing facts in their bearing upon theory, the better equipped he is for the work. Preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of the scientific thinker, and these problems are first revealed to the observer by his theoretical studies.* (Malinowski, 1922).

Despite Malinowski's 1920s diction and touching faith in science, I think this is still the best statement on the conditions for meaningful praxis in ethnographic fieldwork. It also diagnoses my situation on the iCan project. Like many ethnographers meeting the timescales of commercial work, I had not brought enough 'foreshadowed problems' into the field. Especially not enough to resist being sucked into the maelstrom of social software 'best practice'. But I had enough respect for empiricism, that when the prototype concepts tested badly, I went looking for explanations and turned to theory. Discovering Maffesoli helped us go back and see the 'facts' we had gathered on grassroots campaigns in a new light that shaped the practical recommendations we would make for the website.

Our interpretation of grass roots campaigns: as emergent in nature; as rooted in experiential being together; and as human projects driven by affect and effervescence as much as efficiency and purposiveness lead to a different concept of iCan. The site is now more ad hoc and modular, works to a user's own timescale and agenda; it acts as a resource to feed their efforts; instead of the platform for staging an 'online campaign'. There is no longer a 'start campaigning' button (mandating action) on its homepage. The BBC showed amazing responsiveness in scaling back the proposition we had all arrived at.

If it had taken an outright user rejection for praxis to be achieved, this can significantly be attributed to another force which complemented and intensified the usual new media logic of practice. I said earlier that iCan's early concept was influenced by the zeitgeist of social software. And Martin Vogel, the iCan Project Leader, confirms that the team saw themselves as "Definitely part of the social

software movement" (Vogel, 2005). Zeitgeist is a powerful force in the new media and technology industry; and it is operationalised by the almost universal practice of benchmarking (looking at choice selection of products doing similar things to your area and learning from them; borrowing and improving ideas and approaches). What this technique also does is spread the influence of a zeitgeist; creating norms of what is right to do; what would be the old hat approach; or what would be innovative and 'cutting edge'. Furthermore, because these objects are out there and tangible, for a time their very existence says more about their essential rightness than any evidence could prove or disprove.

Why is this an issue for praxis? Because zeitgeist gets in its way; becomes an obstacle in the necessary dialectic between theory and data and our attempts to resolve their encounter into an outcome we can apply in practice.

Zeitgeist often has more charisma (in the Weberian sense of authority derived from a non-rational basis) than either theory or data; and therefore has more power to influence. On this project we were all swept along by the social software zeitgeist for a time. We all believed that drawing from it we had invented the ultimate linear, rational, solution "for all your campaigning needs" (whoever you were). The iCan project leader offered a further explanation for the hub concept "We got a bit too fixated on that from a research point of view, and even design point of view, probably because it was the most innovative part of the proposition". (Vogel, 2005). The desire to be innovative within one's community of practice is a strong motivation whatever your community, and its significant to note how this can lead one away from the perspective of the 'end user'. This project also reveals how on top of customary habits and ways of doing things every such community is swept by ongoing revolutions in practice that may carry equal weight.

All until the shock of the prototype testing results brought us out of the social software zeitgeist and back into alignment with our users - the local campaigners and would-be campaigners already immersed in their networks of sociality. They did not want iCan to run their campaigns; just contribute to them.

Sometimes research works; it really does restore a sense of the real. You can't put too much importance on being empirical or theoretical; and for this project you can't overemphasize the importance of two stages of work. Achieving knowledge on this project was cyclical. But the latter stage of the project devoted to 'practice' - using prototype screens almost as a projective technique - proved more fundamental for opening up and developing our ideas about grass roots campaigning than the ethnographic research phase would have on it own. It was also through responding to this crisis and drawing on Maffesoli; that we were able to 'do theory' on this grass roots phenomenon rather than simply 'using' it.

Therefore, I want to suggest polemically and certainly seemingly self-servingly, that commercial ethnographers can achieve a profound knowledge of social phenomena while pursuing their commissioned work. And furthermore, that in many ways they are in an equally good position to those in academia to do this. Structurally, Bourdieu (1988) has shown how academic career trajectories are advanced through point scoring by critiquing the texts of the previous generation of luminaries. While this endows them with many 'foreshadowed problems' (pace Malinowski) it also means that in many ways an academic career is oriented practically toward the past – possibly drawing on present research just enough to complete the critique of the elders.

Now in client work, one of the drawbacks has always been that we are hardly free to pursue our own research agendas (which of course creates difficulties in amassing cumulative knowledge). But it also means we are often guided (more like thrusted) by our clients into hot spots of emerging phenomena – especially as concerns the socio-technical nexus. In blundering into a fresh area where we, or maybe no one has previous expertise; but by being empirically-led as well as theoretically informed, we can break new ground (even without research grants). As I believe we did by extending Maffesoli's theory to grass roots campaigning.

Having a wealth of past references ready-to-hand is not enough alone to guarantee you are in a position to grasp social reality. One can apply in-depth theory at a latter stage when it can still shape the outcome. So I want to suggest that Malinowski's quote can be read both ways: not only - contra applied or commercial ethnography - that we may not be in the position to take as many theories or 'foreshadowed problems' into the field. But also - contra academia - that by having more theories (and being more professionally invested in them) academics may be more likely to hold on to them – and not refine them in light of empirical evidence. Having too few or too many pre-conceived ideas *can* spoil the account – and thereby omit the unexpected but essential. Sometimes it may be best to observe naively, or at least uncommittedly, as long as you don't stay naïve for too long. As much of the SST (Sociology of Science and Technology) work has shown, we are not all as heroic as Malinowski – professional thinkers often stick by their 'pre-conceived ideas' and don't much enjoy seeing them falsified. (Latour, 1988).

To combat this I certainly am not advocating naïve empiricism; or letting the 'facts' speak for themselves. One could never interpret this paper as downplaying the significance of theory – Maffesoli is after all the *deus ex machina* of this story. My point is simply that in Malinowski's formula: 'moulding theories according to the facts' vs. 'seeing facts in their bearing upon theory', this must be a balanced equation. And on balance I suggest people on projects usually major in the former and minor in the later; while for academics the relationship often runs in reverse. This gives both camps an equal chance at getting at the 'truth' of phenomena. But, I believe, gives project people an edge in effecting praxis.

Finally, in interpreting this paper, I want to offer a warning and an encouragement. In this discussion of an early project concept that scaled back on its plans to facilitate grass roots campaigning through a website, I am not trying to re-circulate any simple distinctions about the value of the 'real' vs. the 'online' world. As devices and systems become more ubiquitous and more usable these worlds are certainly becoming more continuous. Instead my message is that we must always remember the importance of context and that adoption and adaptations only ever occur within contexts; and will do so at variable paces and degrees of success for different human practices – with no inevitability that all practices will get there in the end. We do ourselves (and our clients) a disservice to overestimate the rapidity or desirability of all such change, because real innovation in technology design will only take place by delineating, as a baseline, exactly what people feel does gets lost in the transformation. If anyone can and should do this, it is we ethnographers. There is no other professional group who can both look so deeply into (and out from) a user's internal (emic) perspective while remaining resistant enough to the lure of technological determinism to say the content of these perspectives still matters. Therefore I see our prime role as double; as defenders of the real and the best chroniclers of context.

I guess my only enemy here is the zeitgeist; because I believe swallowing a zeitgeist leads to hubris and over-extension of the preferred means at hand; while sustained theoretical reflection leads to humility and more appropriate praxis. The warning is serious; there are zeitgeist everywhere (industry and theoretical ones too) that condition and direct human action to such an extent that we often do

not know we are making their choices. And there is something like the whole bias in our culture towards two magic words called 'new technology' that even we as critical ethnographers don't always manage to escape.

So while not being naïve either about any transcendental value in theory or data; I think we should everywhere be on guard against the unthought assumptions of the zeitgeist - in whatever guise it may take – including our own professional hubris.

NOTES

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[1] It was an 'experience model' of the type pioneered at E-lab by Rick Robinson, who describes them as "tools to think with". The method was to take the detailed data about events within each of our of twelve grass roots campaigns (forming a broad sample) then aggregate it into a general form which would be a visual and descriptive representation of a wide range of present and future campaigns.

[2] Steps in the transformation would include - using an: online campaign journal, calendar, and 'issue page'; as well as interacting with: user groups, champions, and individuals; in different: locations and organizations.

[3] Shirky (2003) Draws fascinating conclusions from WR Bion – the pioneer of group psychotherapy - to illuminate the nature of 'individual' / 'group' interaction. But this is still a decontextualised study from an ethnographic standpoint.

[4] Without sounding overly schematic, 'elective sociality' can be seen as occupying the same intermediate or 3rd space in the evolution of more recognized 'social' forms; that grass roots campaigning occupies for the 'political'; which is why it seems to follow that the one gives rise to the other.

[5] In an early example of an internet campaign, Charlene Blake posted her comments on defective brakes on her Chrysler to a newsgroup evoking responses from hundreds and leading to a class action suit against the automaker and recall of 350,000 vehicles

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