

# Networks for Social Knowledge: The Anti-NAFTA Challenge

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Many social movement theorists contend that access to and ownership of information is a central social conflict that can catalyze the development of a social movement and is critical to its continuance and expansion. Alberto Melucci considers “the production and the appropriation of resources which are crucial for a global information-based society” (Melucci, 1995, p. 116) to be a core issue for social movements. This includes the ability to produce information as well as have access to it. Others have commented that information technologies and services are increasingly part of state-sponsored industrial policy, and important carriers of the market in the information economy. In their view this perspective

helps us understand the social implications of technological change, the factors behind these changes, and what they mean in terms of communication, distributive justice, and people’s ability to participate in the range of institutions and issues shaping the social landscape (Bailie and Winseck, 1997, p. 3).

In this way, communications technologies are recognized to be critical forces in shaping culture and society.

There has been much discussion of the use of TV and radio for spread of the movement message, and there are many examples of how they have catalyzed and fostered the spread of social movements (Harries-Jones, 1985; Moseley, 1995 Serra, 1996). These forms of media and communication continue to be

critical factors in promoting the social movement message, and in providing the information that may spark a social movement. However, the new computer-based information technologies can spark the spread of movement ideas at a rate not seen before, making information accessible to the public to an unprecedented degree. Frederick (1997) suggests, for example, that continent-wide computer networks in North America are fostering the emergence of the public as a force in international relations. Communication flows are no longer controlled by elites. The struggle of the Chiapas and the debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement in Mexico is an example of how computer networks have contributed to the development of a sense of self-identification, strengthened ties among diverse NGOs, and supported exchange of information, planning of joint strategies, and agreement on policy statements. It is argued that computer activism altered the dynamics of the Chiapas confrontation, downgrading it from a primarily military situation to a political challenge in which the government was forced by public opinion to negotiate with the activists – at least to a certain extent (Frederick, 1997). Escobar suggests that the Internet has enabled a number of grassroots practices, including collaboration among a multiplicity of actors in various parts of the world at local, national, regional and global levels; coalitions among these groups and actors with varying aims intensities and trust levels; coordinated responses to ongoing