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# Climate Change and the Media

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sages, exactly how these messages are mediated within and between different countries and cultures is worthy of much more study (Boykoff, 2008c; Hulme, 2008). Publics in different social networks, in different countries, and in different cultures end up hearing and reacting to different messages about climate change as they are mediated by different social institutions.

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## CHAPTER 11

# The Web and Climate Change Politics

## Lessons from Britain?

■ Neil T. Gavin

### Introduction

Climate change is a burning issue, but it has complex scientific dimensions, and policy implications that are equally complex and contested. Citizens need information to orient themselves towards developments, and to make educated political and lifestyle decisions with respect to it. Where would such information come from? Political communication is often fixated with “old media”; however, the Web—with instant messaging, e-mail, blogs, etc.—is of increasing interest to scholars seeking to understand the way politics and communication interplay. Some see it as an increasingly prominent medium in its own right, having the capacity to enhance the public sphere, enliven debate, and act as a locus for citizen engagement in politics. As such, it offers the opportunity to change politics in quite positive, possibly profound, ways. It can close the distance between citizens, encourage a greater understanding of political issues, facilitate mobilisation, and, thereby, allow more meaningful participation in political affairs. This is certainly the view of those Oates (2008) describes as “cyber-optimists.”

Much of the research on the development and influence of the Web has been conducted in America. However, America has a distinctive political culture, party

structure, and level of Web development, making it different from Britain in important ways. Furthermore, work on Web politics in the UK often focuses on parliament and parties (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward 2005), or on election campaigns (Lusoli & Ward, 2005). There is much less attention to day-to-day Web engagement with specific issues like climate change. Few studies explore the Web and climate change simultaneously (Rogers & Marres, 2000; Lederbogen & Trebbe, 2003; Malone & Klein, 2007), even fewer dealing with the Web as a medium and its role in the politics of climate change (Ladle, Jepson, & Whittaker, 2005).

The following analysis initially emphasises how the public use the web to access political information, and whether they trust its content. This places in context citizen orientations towards the *specifics* of climate change politics on the Internet. The focus then changes to Web content, and commentary on climate change, how citizens access this, and the likely difficulties experienced. Finally, there is critical assessment of the Web as necessarily a tool assuring successful political mobilisation around climate change. A case is made that the Web is not the positive contribution to the public sphere often suggested, and that success is conditioned by many factors that have little to do with the Internet. The objective is not to deny that the Web presents important opportunities to citizens. Rather, it offers a critical assessment of its current capacities as a contributor to political engagement and debate. The overall conclusion is that, for British citizens to make effective use of the Web, they need to be a good deal more connected, interested, persistent, and "Web-savvy" than they actually are. Consequently, its influence on climate change politics may still only be marginal.

### Web Use—Politics in General and Climate Change in Particular

The significance of the Web is partly contingent on how people orient themselves towards it. But who uses the Web and for what? And how does this relate to the specifics of climate change? The picture is becoming clearer as evidence accumulates. One recent study (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005) explores Web use.

The most salient results are reproduced in Table 1, and the figures show few Internet users engaging with politics. Furthermore, when expressed as a proportion of the whole population (in squared brackets), the numbers are very small. And these responses are not cumulative, but overlapping. In fact, only 8 percent of the population report engaging in any one of these activities (Gibson et al., 2005: 570).

**Table 1: Engagement in Online Political Activity in the UK**

Online Political Activity	(% of Internet Users) weighted N = 965	[As % of the Population]
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Looked for political information	8	[4]
Visited the site of a political organisation	5	[3]
Signed an online petition	4	[2]
Sent an e-mail to a politician	4	[2]
Sent an e-postcard newspaper article	4	[2]
Sent an e-mail to local/national public services	4	[2]
Signed up for e-news bulletin	3	[2]
Downloaded software from political organisation sites	2	[1]
Not engaged in any of the specified activities	83	[41]

Source: Gibson, Lusoli, and Ward (2005), augmented with the percentages in squared brackets.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006).

Table 2 also shows that the numbers are quite modest (see squared brackets). The lack of detail in it is frustrating, though. People may "look for political information about local government services," yet if this only amounts to checking when council's compulsory recycling kicks in, it is scarcely a significant contribution to meaningful self-education or engaged debate, notwithstanding that this is still a "minority sport." The authors briefly allude to the fact that 61 percent of Internet active respondents use the Web to look for current news (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006: 303). At 37 percent of the whole population, this constitutes a substantial minority. However, the issue is not pursued, and as we will see later, this may simply be people using the Web to access conventional media sites.

**Table 2: Engagement in Online Political Participation in Britain in 2005**

Online Participation	(% of Internet Users)	[As % of the population]
N = 1,309 (Current Internet users)		
Contacting		
e-mail MP	3	[2]

e-mail councillor	5	[3]
at least one of the above	6	[4]
Looking for political information about		
central government services	21	[13]
local government services	19	[12]
schools or education	19	[12]
MP, local councillor or politician	8	[5]
at least one of the above	37	[23]

Source: Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006), augmented with the percentages in squared brackets.

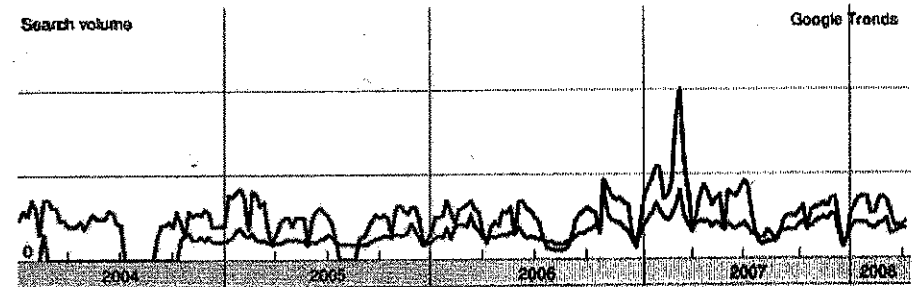
This evidence makes the Internet's impact look less substantial than the cyber-optimists suggest. The results are also consistent with previous research. Two studies suggest the Web was not used extensively by the public to access political information: Towler (2002) says only 11 percent do so, while Lusoli (2005: 253–254) concludes that only 8 percent used the Web to garner information at European elections, a figure only marginally higher for younger people. These figures are also comparable to a recent study of Scots, only 9 percent of whom use the Web to source political information (Scottish Broadcasting Commission, 2008). Notwithstanding the disappointing levels of engagement, the issue is not Web use per se, but use relative to other media. Importantly, research suggests that only a tiny proportion of the population use it as their *main* source of information. Sancho (2001: 20) states that during the 2001 election its use as a main source was negligible—below 4 percent. Worcester and Mortimore (2001: 15) have the Web as the *main* source for only 1 percent of the public, not unlike Hargreaves and Thomas's (2002: 45) 2 percent. More recently, Ofcom (2007: 17) suggests that between 2002 and 2006 the use of the Web as a *main* source of news has changed from 2 percent to an unexciting 6, therefore only *marginally* beyond measurement error—the threshold at which change is considered more real than apparent.

These figures should not surprise us. The Web is only trusted as an impartial source by 1 percent of the population (Worcester & Mortimore, 2001: 15), and certainly by fewer than trust the conventional media (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002: 70). Overall, the evidence suggests that the Web is not the overwhelming presence many imagine. There is no comparable evidence dealing with climate change specifically. But one wonders whether a public that scarcely trusts or uses the Web to engage with politics will change when it comes to this issue. Indeed, according to one study, even amongst well-educated, computer literate people actively interested in environmental

issues, only a minority use it as an information source, and of these, most do this *in combination* with conventional media (Haklay, 2002).

Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006) do, however, note that broadband connection is increasing. Does this mean more people using the Web to explore climate change? The evidence suggests not—there has, in fact, been no *corresponding* growth in the Web's use to search for this material. Google Trends tracks searches on Google, displaying the proportion of searches on particular topics relative to total numbers. Though not ideal, it shows the overall patterning for "climate change" and "global warming." Figure 1 reproduces the results—the lower line representing "climate change," the upper line, "global warming." With the exception of a spike in 2007, searches on these items have been reasonably static. So even if increased broadband offers the *potential* for more active use, it is not immediately obvious this has materialised.

**Figure 1: Google Trends Registration of Searches on "Global Warming" or "Climate Change" for the UK, January 2004–March 2008**

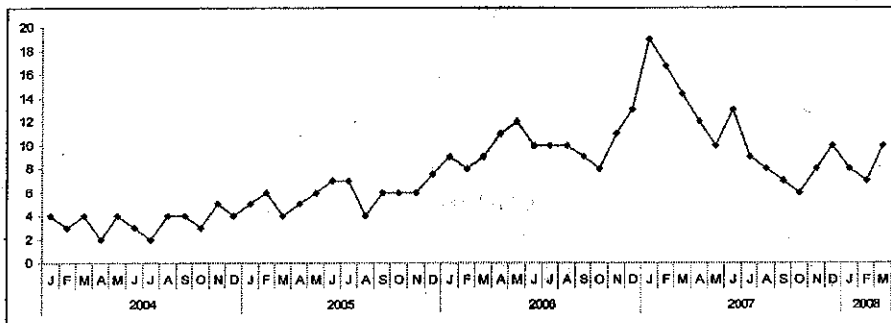


The key here is the general level of interest. Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006: 309) suggest that those *interested* in politics are more likely to engage in online activity than their disinterested counterparts. This brings in the issue of public interest in, or concern about, environmental issues. It is significant that there was a peak at the end of 2006 in survey responses, indicating that the environment was an important issue facing the country (see Figure 2 below).<sup>1</sup> We need to be careful in reading these numbers, but it is telling that rising concern *preceded* the peak in Web searches on climate change. Importantly, though, there is strong evidence that this salience is driven by the amount of press attention afforded the issue in the press (Gavin, 2007a). So the increased number of Web searches may be the product of attention in the conventional media. It is also significant that Web searches on climate change and global

1 <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/content/turnout/political-monitor-trends-the-most-important-issues.ashx>.

warming also dropped back to their long-term level *after* the salience of the environment subsided. Finally, press interest can indeed subside, and like the public, newspapers are often much more interested in “bread-and-butter” issues like crime and health, than the environment (Gavin, 2007a).

**Figure 2: The Percentage Stating “Pollution/Environment” Is the Most Important Issue Facing Britain Today, January 2004–March 2008**



Source: Ipsos-MORI (Political Trends)

So the Web may have *potential*, but currently it is far from being fully realised. However, this could change. Dramatic climatic disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, might stimulate interest, as might the next Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report in 2013, especially if it is alarming. Here we might well expect greater media attention, resurgent concern about environmental issues, and greater use of the Web as a source of information.

### Excursions on the Web—Information Paradise or Online Jungle?

But if citizens canvass the Web for climate change material, what will they encounter? Definitely there are outstanding sites that could give the citizens an appreciation of climate *science*. Wikipedia could be a starting point, although doubts remain about its accuracy (Rector, 2008) and politicised editing.<sup>2</sup> Beyond this are the British Meteorological Office and British Antarctic Survey, but these do not really deal with politics. The same cannot be said of the Royal Society's dedicated pages,<sup>3</sup> or those of

2 See “Companies and Party Aides Cast Censorious Eye over Wikipedia,” *Guardian*, 15 August 2007.

3 <http://royalsociety.org/landing.asp?id=1278>.

the BBC and the press.<sup>4</sup> But the press does so from a particular point on the political spectrum, and may not be the best place to look for balanced and detached information. The same could also be said of NGO sites.<sup>5</sup> But flagging all these sites presupposes that the citizens know where to begin. If this assumption is doubtful, where might they start? An obvious place is Google. The first thing that strikes the observer is the numbers of hits generated—over 80 million for “climate change” or “global warming,” and near 40 million if they are taken separately. “Information overload” is therefore a problem; then it comes to sorting and sifting the material—doubly problematic when hits reveal underlying hypertext links, prompting an exponential explosion in the number of sources unearthed.

And information overload does not go away if users narrow their search to “climate change” plus “Britain.” This still highlights three million sites. If we look at a printout of the first page of these hits, the Meteorological Office site is top, one solid on science, but not heavy on politics, and of little use in explaining the politics of climate change. The site that immediately follows is from the conventional media (“Now the Pentagon Tells Bush: Climate Change Will Destroy Us,” *Observer*, 22 February 2008), but how much background knowledge would someone need to make sense of it? The next produces the BBC's specialist Web page on climate change, which certainly contains extensive commentary on this issue.<sup>6</sup> But beyond this we find a Defra page, outlining government policy in detail (“UK Legislation: Taking the Climate Change Bill Forward—Progress”)<sup>7</sup>—scarcely an impartial source. The density of the commentary here would also overwhelm those with limited background knowledge. The final hit on our printout takes us to a *Times* newspaper story written by Sir Nicholas Stern (“Britain, Climate Change Leaders,” 22 February 2008). Like the *Observer* story, this might convince a visitor of the gravity of threat, but might also require significant background knowledge to appreciate.

Narrowing the search even more tightly may limit information overload, but it brings other problems. If we do a search on “feed-in tariffs,” “global warming,” and “Britain,” we get fewer hits than the one million plus from “climate change,” “Britain,” and “renewables.” The tariffs are a mechanism for assuring that citizens generating their own energy for delivery to the grid are given a price that makes installation of the technology economically viable. But even with this narrow focus, Google still generates over 11,000 hits. The first is again from the conventional media—“Germany Sets Shining Example in Providing a Harvest for the World” (*Guardian*, 23 July 2007). British citizens might have little interest in a story from distant Germany, and again might struggle to understand it. The second hit is “Mabinogogiblog,” the blog of a private individual, worryingly strap lined: “Original think: poet, inventor, green politi-

4 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/climate/> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/climatechange>.

5 <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/climate>.

6 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/climate/>.

7 <http://www.defra.gov.uk/Environment/climatechange/uk/legislation/index.htm>.

cal activist and medical practitioner; a writer who values brevity in a world of information overload. Most of the time. Sometimes I do go on a bit, I admit."<sup>8</sup> But what qualifications does this individual have, and therefore how seriously should one take the commentary? A third hit takes us to "Celsius," an activist grouping whose "About us" pages are not very illuminating on its background or funding, or the identity and political orientations of its leaders—the sort of information we need to place its commentary in perspective.<sup>9</sup> The final hit on our printout takes us to a brief article on "HeatmyHome," a business Web site specialising in solar panels,<sup>10</sup> one that might interest a prospective buyer, but not someone trying to understand feed-in tariffs as an issue.

Even if we assume that citizens—particularly the Web-savvy younger ones—possess the critical and analytical skills to use the Internet efficiently (which recent research disputes),<sup>11</sup> these examples highlight serious limitations on the Web's usefulness—especially where the object is to access information and commentary that will encourage engaged, balanced, and rational debate. Information overload means that we will wade through acres of dross, some of it commercial advertising, struggling to separate the wheat from the chaff when presented with virtually anonymous sites whose credibility we may correctly view as suspect. Importantly, time spent in accessing and evaluating (then dismissing) such material is effectively time lost, a factor significant for those with limited interest, patience, or free time.

Conventional media Web sites are a potentially useful source, but there are substantive as well as theoretical concerns here, in assessing their overall contribution. In abstract terms clarity is needed in determining whether they represent a distinct manifestation of the Web, qua "medium." Perhaps the Web here is better understood as an alternative *transmission* mechanism for these media, which are far and away the public's most trusted and most often used source of political information. This perspective sees the Web as an *adjunct* to conventional sources, rather than as an additional one. Furthermore, while conventional media Web sites offer journalists greater space to elaborate upon issues, this comes at a heavy price. The pressure placed on them to produce additional Web-based copy alongside conventional packages—with fewer resources and in a finite amount of time—can lead to a dependence on readily available PR sources that, some argue, compromises the quality and integrity of the resultant coverage (Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008).<sup>12</sup> So the Web-based mani-

8 <http://greenerblog.blogspot.com/2007/12/feed-in-tariff-hmg-logical-challenge.html>.

9 <http://www.celsius.com/2008/01/10/energy-ethics-and-feed-in-tariffs/>.

10 <http://www.heatmyhome.co.uk/solar-panels/>.

11 British Library report on "Generation Google" at <http://www.bl.uk/news/2008/pressrelease20080116.html>.

12 See also "The Digital Challenge: The Future of Newspapers Is Online," *Guardian*, 7 January 2008, for the pressures bi-media production place on journalists.

festations of conventional media journalism will not necessarily be an unalloyed or wholly positive contribution to informed debate.

## Blogosphere or "Rantosphere"?

Yet the casual surfer may be less interested in *viewing* online material than in the Web's *interactive* potential. Given that the conventional media figure quite prominently in Web searches around climate change, it seems appropriate to take an example from here. It is a story by George Monbiot ("Carbon Capture Is Turning Out to Be Just Another Great Green Scam," *Guardian*, 18 March 2008). Its structure is not uncommon, as we will see later, and it has interactive additions. But they are a salutary reminder of problems endemic in interactive communication on the Web. First, below the story are 150 entries, containing 26.5 *thousand* words, including numerous hypertext links to other documents. It is certainly a pacey dialogue—at points "contributor to author," "contributor to contributor," or "contributor to reader." But arguably, few would have patience to read the whole thing. And if they did, they would have little time left to look elsewhere. The contributions do contain moderate exchanges of evidence and argument, but there are high numbers of controversial and uncheckable assertions, plus more than a few questions with no obvious answers, or answers with no obvious questions. Entries are often highly disjointed and difficult to follow—part polemic, part rant, part ramble, part squabble, and often involving people flatly contradicting or sniping at one another. The calibre and tone of content is often "uninspiring," and can in places descend to playground level. In all, this enormous interactive exchange, perhaps, obscures more than it illuminates, generating more heat than light in terms of rounded and balanced debate.

If this is the face of online interaction, it is not a pretty one. But it is not the only place to start if one seeks interactive opportunities. When a Google search is used on "global warming," "Britain," plus "blog," around half a million sites surface. First on a printout is a business selling weather information.<sup>13</sup> The next is "Climate Ark."<sup>14</sup> Beyond this is a Reuters journalist's site,<sup>15</sup> then a page of unknown provenance headed "Open Mind," containing a range of threads.<sup>16</sup> George Reisman's site is also flagged, where the world is seen through a particular political prism—"This blog is a commentary on contemporary business, politics, economics, society, and culture, based on the values of Reason, Rational Self-Interest, and Laissez-Faire Capitalism."<sup>17</sup> Finally, there is a hit on a site that is not a blog per se, "The Register."<sup>18</sup>

13 <http://global-warming.accuweather.com/>.

14 [http://www.climateark.org/blog/2006/02/global\\_warming\\_brings\\_severe\\_d.asp](http://www.climateark.org/blog/2006/02/global_warming_brings_severe_d.asp).

15 <http://blogs.reuters.com/environment/2008/04/28/smoking-bans-stoke-global-warming/>.

16 <http://tamino.wordpress.com/>.

17 <http://georgereisman.com/blog/2006/11/britains-stern-review-on-global.html>.

18 [http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/04/08/bbc\\_blog\\_bully/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/04/08/bbc_blog_bully/).

These examples present a range of problems that are both generic and systemic. The Climate Ark site flags itself as a "Climate Change and Global Warming Portal, Featuring Customized Climate Search of Reviewed, Authoritative Content." But like the Celsius site cited earlier, determining who or what is behind it is problematic, and an independent follow-up on its leading lights reveals little useful detail about its finances, whether blog entries are moderated, or indeed, where the Web page is based, geographically. A Web user might well ask, can I trust this source, and have I the energy to pursue an answer to this question? The Reuters site further highlights the difficulties experienced with the Monbiot article, namely "facts" whose veracity is, at the very best, suspect, and contributions bordering on abusive. These are obviously not uncommon problems, but "The Register" highlights other ones. It is not a blog per se, but is an item beginning "Blog bully crowds over BBC climate victory," and exploring one other blogger's claim to have influenced the BBC's coverage of global warming—with more than a suggestion that the individual in question is something of a "SIF" (single issue fanatic). Significantly, the claim about influencing the BBC is contested. One may wonder how long it would take an observer to determine the truth or otherwise of the claim. Indeed, this could take considerable time and energy, and someone prepared to invest it would probably have to be SIF as well.

The obvious question is, where does this place "normal" citizen surfers? Accepting or rejecting the thrust of a piece of dialogue depending on how congenial one finds it may keep citizens active and engaged, but the process is unlikely to be a substantial contribution to informed or balanced debate. As one author put it, "The Internet teems with so many competing claims and myths that the public has little shared basis for assessing evidence. Virtually everyone can join discussions, leaving 'experts' without any trump card" (Ungar, 2000: 301–302). The preceding survey tells us that there is certainly a wealth of information and interactive commentary out there. But it does not in itself necessarily constitute useable information, any more than usable information constitutes a contribution to knowledge or to rational debate. Information and dialogue are often only semi-structured, or at worst, unstructured. Sifting through this is difficult, especially where sources are unattributed, and therefore effectively anonymous. The question is not, can the Web give us access to information and dialogue? but where do we find authoritative commentary whose sources are known and can be trusted?

### The Web, Climate Change, and Political Participation

However, the Web is obviously more than just a debating forum. Many view it as an invaluable tool for political mobilisation, assisting especially organisations and causes that are not in the mainstream (Oates, 2008). Indeed, Bennett (2003: 143) argues that the Internet can "facilitate the loosely structured networks, the weak identity ties, and the patterns of issue and demonstration organising that define a new global

protest politics." The demonstrations against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle in 1999—which had strong environmental and climate change themes—are often portrayed as a salutary example of the Web's role in fostering affiliation between disparate groups—this, in turn, helping them stage effective protest (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). And it is also suggested—somewhat unconvincingly—that the Web presence of radical groupings in Seattle allowed them to capitalise on the interest generated by the protest (Owens & Palmer, 2003). The Web is certainly being used by climate change groups in Britain to help mobilise support for action. Plane Stupid and Airport Watch are cases in point (see chapter 9 for Doyle's discussion of the efforts of Plane Stupid). They currently use the Web to help thwart increased aviation activity,<sup>19</sup> and indeed Plane Stupid has been reasonably successful in highlighting their cause with successful, high-profile stunts.<sup>20</sup> Their Web sites offer ongoing commentary, information about the issues, and—importantly—access to a newsletter, reports on ongoing action, and encouragement to start or join an activist group.

But offering such examples should not blind us to the contextual influences that hedge about such activities. The issue here is not activism per se, nor indeed the Web's role in stimulating it. Rather, it concerns *effective* activism, and the sorts of factors that can impede it, regardless of the Web presence of groups. Relevant here is a study of two instances where the Web was used to stimulate and organise protest demonstrations, Seattle in 1999 and Trafalgar Square in 2000, both of which had environmental dimensions, with climate change in the background (Gavin, 2007b: 108–118). They show that the conjunction and interplay of different situational, organisational, and public relations factors—termed the "protest dynamic"—led to very different outcomes, irrespective of Web activity. In Seattle, protesters were well organised, disciplined, media- and Web-savvy, and had a clear focus on the WTO and a clear critique of it. They also faced a WTO and local police force who made a range of inept PR blunders. In contrast, the groups involved at Trafalgar Square had no specific target for their protest, and had a flattened and dispersed organisational structure. While this is precisely the sort of grouping Bennett (2003) thinks would benefit from Web-assisted mobilisation, it also meant that they lacked the cohesion and discipline of their Seattle counterparts. Consequently, this hampered their ability both to articulate a clear set of unified aims (on the Web or elsewhere) or rein in their hotheads. Finally, many of the groups involved were hostile towards the press and lacked PR professionalism—in stark contrast to the police, who were fully geared up for effective image management. The different contexts led to very different outcomes, though in both cases there was a modicum of violence. In Seattle the mobilisation was largely successful and got a good deal of press. In contrast, the London protesters got decidedly unflattering and hostile coverage, often focused on the violent behaviour of a

19 See <http://www.planestupid.com/> and <http://www.airportwatch.org.uk/> Web sites, respectively.

20 See "Runway Protesters Take to Roof of Parliament," *Guardian*, 27 February 2008.

few—a potentially quite damaging development that may have undone much of their diligent work on the Web.

The point made here is not that the Web is incapable of facilitating mobilised participation—on climate change or any other issue. Rather, it is that when assessing the Web's role in politics, Internet activity is not an end in itself, and is not a sufficient condition for *effective* participation. Web mobilisation cannot be assessed in isolation from other contextual factors, and Web-active groups are still subject to a range of imperatives and limitations only tangentially related to their Web presence. These play a pivotal role in determining whether Web activity ultimately realises participatory opportunities. This is especially important when Web-facilitated mobilisation causes severe disruption. With regard to climate change groups, this looks like a fairly remote possibility at the moment, though this may change if, as seems likely, highly committed, energetic, and highly motivated groups like Plane Stupid are unable to make an appreciable difference to air traffic growth. The associated frustration could quite readily spill over into more disruptive activity, all the more effectively coordinated through the Web.<sup>21</sup> This is especially worrying where some contributors to the debate on political praxis come as close as anyone dare to the distasteful advocacy of what is euphemistically termed “symbolic violence,” as a tactical means of attracting attention: “Such symbolic protest violence is often a necessary prerequisite to highlight the non-violent elements of a movement that might otherwise be marginalized in the daily struggle for media coverage” (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002: 144). Here the strategy is pursued in order to generate media interest that an organisation's Web presence then exploits in order to raise consciousness. Although, this is a fairly distant prospect in contemporary Britain, there have been incidences of violence at anti-airport demonstrations.<sup>22</sup> The fact that complaints were levelled at the police, and not the protesters, is almost irrelevant. The Trafalgar Square protest and its aftermath show that it does not take many angry hotheads to reverse the gains accomplished by the astute use of the Web as a mobilising tool.

It could be argued, then, that Web-based mobilisation should always be seen in the light of the array of factors that normally hedge around conventional pressure group activity. This also extends to two further issues. The first is “countervailing forces,” the notion that for every activists grouping, there are often others mobilising towards diametrically opposed goals. Significant here is the fact that Web-based techniques have been used by a range of well-financed and well-organised interests to impede climate change action or deny global warming realities (Monbiot, 2006; Gelspan, 2004; Lockwood, 2008). From this perspective, Web mobilisation—on climate change or any other issue—rarely takes place in a communication vacuum. So the Web as a mobilising weapon is decidedly double-edged, and need not offer uncontested benefits for Bennett's (2003) non-mainstream organisations. Perhaps

21 For a recent example of such frustration see, 'Heathrow next, warn activists who caused Stansted chaos', Guardian 09/12/08.

22 [www.planestupid.com/Docs/JJones\\_policing.pdf](http://www.planestupid.com/Docs/JJones_policing.pdf).

equally important is the “logic of collective action” (Olson, 1965), the notion that in any group there is an incentive to free-ride on the actions of other members, especially where activism is geared towards a “public good,” and where the group cannot coerce people into action, or offer them selective benefits. Climate change is perhaps the ultimate collective good. And any gains achieved by group mobilisation are garnered not only by inactive members but also by those outside the organisation altogether. The Web may, indeed, lower participation costs, extend participation to groups formally marginalised, and enhance participatory experiences (Lusoli & Ward, 2003). But there is some doubt that it will cancel out, or substantively reverse, Olson's collective logic (see Lupia & Sin, 2003).

The case made here is *not* that Web-based mobilisation is necessarily ineffective in rallying the troops or facilitating horizontal communication between (and vertical communication within) climate change organisations. Indeed, the Web can have a marked effect on pressure group dynamics—as the Seattle mobilisation or the actions of the Countryside Alliance<sup>23</sup> in Britain show quite clearly (Lusoli & Ward, 2003).

Rather, I have argued that, when assessing the potential role of the Web in political participation, it is important to distinguish between mobilisation as a goal in its own right—whether this is organised via the Web or through more conventional means—and *effective* mobilisation. The latter is conditioned by factors that often have little to do with the Web itself. Furthermore, it is important to remind ourselves that the momentum of contemporary anti-globalisation protest now seems all but spent. And while the Countryside Alliance has been successful in some respects, it actually failed to prevent the enactment of anti-hunting legislation. Finally, the scuppering of New Labour's road-pricing plans—which might have had a significant impact on CO2 emissions—is also a salutary reminder that Web-based activism may act against, as well as towards, climate change ends, since the web was used very successfully to mobilise resistance to the measure.

## Conclusions

Admittedly, people may use the Web to access “apolitical” information on climate change, such as the science commentary offered by the Royal Society. Such content has not been the object of this analysis, though clearly it may have political undertones or have political implications. But one could argue that the Web as a source of such “apolitical” information will only have political significance insofar as citizens connect the “apolitical” with the “political.” This is where the preceding assessment of “politics and climate change on the Web” comes in. This chapter has assessed what the Web offers British people by way of democratised, rational, and balanced engage-

23 The Countryside Alliance is an organisation promoting issues relating to the countryside such as hunting, shooting and angling, and in this instance use the web to help oppose a ban on foxhunting.



ment with climate change. The results suggest that although it has much to offer the average citizen, there is considerable doubt that large numbers are inclined to use it. The Web is certainly not the first port of call when people look for political information. When they do look online, they will encounter an environment that is more digital jungle than "public cyber-sphere." How many will have the interest or stamina to venture there, and what will they find when they do? There are Web sites aplenty, but much of their content smacks of vanity publication, with all the attendant quality issues. The space for online intercommunication has undoubtedly increased, but as we saw, debate without discipline is often rather unedifying. Finally, the Internet can certainly facilitate new forms of political engagement, but this cannot be assessed in isolation from other factors conditioning and limiting participatory effectiveness. Web-based mobilisation, from this perspective, should not be seen as an end in itself.

That said, broadband may offer opportunities in the future for dynamic engagement around climate change. Furthermore, social networking sites like YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace offer new ways to communicate, learn, and debate, for young people in particular. However, as we have seen, broadband connectivity may speed up Internet access, but it does not necessarily lead to more Web-based searches around climate change. And we should note that the BBC's Web pages have nearly as many unique users as Facebook and YouTube combined (BBC Trust, 2008: 70). There is definitely a buzz about these new social networking sites, but it sounds a bit like the enthusiasm expressed in the past for the liberating and democratising potential of the online fora explored above. So this idea, that social networking sites will change the face of democracy, may have to be treated with some scepticism, certainly in the absence of concrete evidence. Meanwhile, social networking sites should also be seen in the context of the "cringe factor" attending the efforts of some politicians in Britain to engage with "the youth" (Fieschi, 2007).

The Web as it is currently constituted is not transforming contemporary British politics in profound ways. But this may change if the context alters. Increased alarm about the social and economic implications of global warming may increase the attention paid to climate change by the press, which in turn may stimulate the Web's use as a source. But this particular development looks some way off. And even if it does become a reality, what people will find when they look there may actually contribute to political engagement in rather unfortunate or counterproductive ways.<sup>24</sup>

## ■ SECTION 4

# The Role of National Agendas

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