

Branded Political Communication: Lifestyle Politics, Logo Campaigns, and the Rise of Global Citizenship

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The scope of political consumerism has expanded greatly in recent years beyond the well-established forms of boycotts, buycotts and socially responsible investing. Some observers argue that a clear distinction between citizen and consumer roles in public life is increasingly difficult to establish (Scammell, 2000; Bennett and Entman, 2000).

Consumerism in the sense of more personalized, less collective public policy choices is becoming the core of the relationships between citizens, representatives, and governments in the electoral politics of a number of nations (Scammell, 1995; Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). Outside the electoral arena, the expanding uses of consumer campaigns are transforming public interest politics by applying direct public pressure on government officials and corporations to adopt higher environmental, human rights, and labor standards. And beyond the nation state, the globalization of economic and

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communication systems has motivated and enabled citizen consumers to make political claims in international arenas.

This chapter explores the rise of what might be called *global citizenship* as characterized by broad coalitions of groups using campaigns against corporations, along with other tactics, to press for greater public accountability in trade regimes, labor practices, human rights, environmental quality, and other areas of corporate social responsibility. The focus of the analysis is on how these campaigns work, beginning with a brief introduction to ways in which globalization has affected both citizen identities and meaningful political action. Stated briefly, the argument goes like this. Public (citizen) identities change as global economies create new personal challenges for managing careers, social relationships, and family life. Cosmopolitan citizens in global societies process their political choices increasingly in terms of how those choices affect their own lifestyles. As lifestyles become more diverse, they are poorly articulated with old political categories such as class, party or religion. As a result, ideological messages – particularly about global justice issues -- are less likely to be received positively by typical citizens. In this context, effective activist political communication increasingly adopts a lifestyle vocabulary anchored in consumer choice, self-image, and personal displays of social responsibility. In particular, attaching political messages to corporate brands becomes a useful way to carry often radical ideas into diverse personal life spaces, as well as across national borders and cultural divides.

The core of the analysis in this chapter explores four general properties of a new global activism that is centered on these networked, lifestyle-oriented political communication campaigns. These defining properties of global activist communication

are illustrated with examples from two logo campaigns: the consumer advocacy campaign against Microsoft and the sweatshop labor campaign against Nike. This analysis shows that activist networks using branded communication strategies can sustain long term political initiatives even in the absence of the strong central coordination and the organizational resources that seem to be required for success in more conventional advocacy politics. At the same time, there may be political disadvantages in loosely networked consumer activist campaigns that lack the decision-making capacity and strategic coherence of more conventional campaigns run by NGO advocacy organizations. Yet both the Nike and Microsoft cases make clear that the branding of political messages is a powerful networking tool. Moreover, branded political communication helps activists gain access to the mass media on terms far more favorable to activist messages than if those messages were packaged in more conventional ideological terms.

Globalization and the Rise of New Citizen Identities

Underlying the new global political consumerism are myriad social and economic changes associated with globalization: transformations of jobs, careers, and labor markets; proliferation of new family models with working parents and more independent children; dislocation of civil society organizations such as unions, churches and civic groups; and the collapse of broad opposition ideologies to the reigning neo-liberal faith in market democracies. These changes vary greatly from nation to nation, yet one common individual-level result seems to be the rise of what has been termed variously a postmodern politics (Inglehart, 1997), a politics of the self or a life politics (Giddens, 1991) or what I have termed lifestyle politics (Bennett, 1998). The latter term is used

increasingly organize social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them. For increasing numbers of citizens -- particularly younger generations who have been born into the global experience (roughly, since 1970) -- politics in conventional (collective, government-centered, electoral) forms has become less salient (Putnam, 2000). Insofar as politics matters at all to many younger citizens, it makes sense within the personal life considerations of job, recreation, shopping, entertainment, fashion, sports, self-improvement, family, friends, and the community involvements that can be scheduled around these things.

Across a whole range of relations with the state, citizens now take a more explicitly consumerist stance, expecting more direct benefits and fewer collective goods, and demanding more choice in education, health care, and other areas of state services. This trend is now so pronounced that Christiansen and Laegreid propose a new model of the state as “the supermarket state,” which they see “primarily as a provider of services responding to the demands of consumers or users” (Christiansen and Laegreid, 2000). Compounding this triumph of market democracy, many left-of-center parties have embraced globalization and the neo-liberal trade economics that drive it. Witness, for example, Tony Blair’s reinvention of the Labour party in Britain, the centrist-business shift of the Social Democrat-Green coalition forged by Gerhard Schroder in Germany, and Bill Clinton’s “rebranding” the Democratic Party around a host of Republican positions, including welfare reform.

The market relations between citizens and their representatives have introduced interesting dynamics into contemporary politics, ranging from weaker political identifications with parties and nations, to a greater ease of adopting cosmopolitan

lifestyles and global political identities (Castells, 1996; Inglehart, 1997). In addition, as individuals are dislocated from traditional social and political institutions and placed increasingly in market competition, they are less likely to see governments as supportive or effective in addressing their personal needs. From that point, it is a short identity shift to detach from the activities of traditional citizenship, and embrace, instead, the public identities and stances of critical, independent-minded consumers.

This shift in citizen identities also implies a shift in the political power of individuals in *late modern* societies that are organized increasingly around the social networks of the self. For many in the ranks of the consuming majority, power involves more than just disciplining representatives and candidates to address their lifestyle concerns; it also extends directly to the centers of corporate power in the economic realm. As Margaret Scammell has observed, the global economy has created an ironic exchange of worker power for consumer power:

As workers, most of us have less power now for all the familiar reasons: technological revolution and economic globalization, abetted by the deregulating governments of the 1980s and 1990s that systematically dismantled many of the legal rights of labor unions. As consumers, though, we at least in the developed North, have more power than ever. We have more money and more choice.... We are better informed shoppers.... Consumer rights and interest groups...are now daily in our mass media. Environmental lobbyists and activists...have a clear and central place in public debate and have demonstrated their ability to score direct hits against the multinationals: Shell and dumping of waste in the

oceans, Monsanto and genetically modified foods, Nike and pay and working conditions in its Third World suppliers' factories. (Scammell, 2000: 351-2)

In some cases, citizens' consumer choices are knowingly -- even radically -- political, aimed at powerful corporations that embody globalization. In other instances, the citizen consumer may be a lifestyle libertarian inclined toward avoiding politics in step with the sweeping trend of political disaffection in the post-industrial democracies (Eliasoph, 1998; Mutz, 2000). Yet, even for those who adopt a stance of political avoidance, their fashion statements and product choices may matter in social image terms

Whether or not they are avowedly political, the behaviors of citizen consumers tend to be centered less around state institutions than most other kinds of political action. As Rose puts it, "Citizenship is no longer primarily realized in a relation with the state, or in a single public sphere, but in a variety of private, corporate and quasi-public practices from working to shopping." (Rose, 1999: 166) While the bases of this shift from citizen to consumer may be clear, it is not at all clear how the organization of political consumerism on such a large scale can be made effective, particularly in cases where the scope of that activism is more global than national, and, in either case, less mediated by government regulation and enforcement.

Challenging Global Economic Power through Activist Communication Networks

As noted in several articles in this volume, many forms of political consumerism fit fairly easily into conventional national politics, from boycotts organized by unions or churches, to product labeling schemes regulated by governments. However, the rise of a new global activism against corporations and other economic organizations presents new political challenges on several fronts. Many activists perceive that global economic arrangements, from trade regimes, to the restructuring of manufacturing, to deregulated labor and capital markets, have empowered corporations to escape the regulatory systems of nations. Indeed, Ulrich Beck (2000) has identified the defining political feature of globalization as the capacity of corporations to engage in *sub-politics* – that is, using the new freedoms offered by global labor, manufacturing, finance and tax options as levers against governments. The dilemma for activists is how to challenge corporate sub-politics when governments themselves are directly implicated, as with participation in trade regimes such as the World Trade Organization, and generally unwilling to challenge the new gospel of neo-liberal economics. How can a sustainable political opposition be organized that crosses borders and cultures? How can larger publics be created and educated in matters of labor, environmental or human rights standards when most cosmopolitan national publics generally favor the consumer and lifestyle indulgences of globalization? And, perhaps most importantly, how can sustainable accountability mechanisms be implemented to protect social and environmental standards in cases where governments seem unwilling to take a regulatory role?

Many global activists have discovered creative communication-based strategies that address the above dilemmas. Above all, activists have learned that the same electronic communication revolution that facilitated the development of global economic

networks (enhancing the sub-politics of the corporate players in those networks) can be used to build global activist networks (enhancing the sub-politics of advocates seeking greater corporate accountability for the social costs of the global economy). As Smith and Smythe argue in their analysis of the WTO protests in Seattle:

The very processes and means of communicating that made globalization possible, we argue, are making globalization contestable. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), primarily the Internet, have facilitated new forms of expression and connection among groups, the growth of new public spaces which are not easily controlled by states and ruling elites. No longer can nation states assume national sovereignty over publicity and political activity (Smith and Smythe, 2000: 1).

Many different sorts of messages travel easily across the frontiers of cyber space, since the Web enables the receivers of information to find the formats and languages that most appeal to them. One communication format that seems particularly effective in reaching both committed activists and complacent consumers, alike, is the symbolic logic of culture jamming: from marching in turtle costumes at WTO protests, to Jonah Peretti's attempt (described in this volume) to attach the term "sweatshop" to a pair of custom Nikes. A core element of culture jamming is the use of emotionally cultivated brands and logos of corporations and their products to direct attention to the realities of human rights, labor abuses, and environmental degradation that are associated with the production of food, fashion, forest products, and other basic lifestyle ingredients (Klein, 1999).

Combining the low cost and global reach of the Internet with the public salience of logo campaigns (that often begin on the Internet and end up in the mass media), sustainable activist networks have developed successful political strategies based on targeting companies and their brands. Unlike boycotts or buycotts, which generally require politically committed consumers to avoid or embrace the products of a company, the logic of logo campaigns may assign a more symbolic role to the consumer as a witness to bad corporate conduct. In many campaigns, the aim is to take the corporation's most precious product -- its brand image -- hostage in the mass media and connect it to unpleasant images that threaten the fragile emotional purity of advertising fantasies. Reports of corporate abuses in the news, business, sports, fashion, and celebrity features introduce political messages into the same meaning contexts in which pure consumerist fantasies have been created through advertising. Such messages about often distant political problems would be hard to communicate otherwise to general publics who may be more sensitive to their fashion statements than they are interested in the brute political logic of global economics.

The goals of this sustained anti-corporate warfare generally include: 1) inducing corporate compliance with social or environmental standards regimes, and 2) inserting otherwise hard to communicate political messages into the closely held personal or lifestyle meaning systems of media publics. The networking capacity of the Internet, when combined with logo-logics that cross different cultures and lifestyles, have resulted in surprising political victories -- often by surprisingly small numbers of seemingly resource-poor activists. As Alan Cowell observed in the New York Times business section:

Increasingly, with multinational corporations gathering unparalleled power as the standard-bearers of freewheeling capitalism—in many countries, more powerful than the governments themselves—they are being held to account by shoestring advocacy groups like Global Witness that have filled the vacuum created by the end of the ideological contest between East and West, between capitalism and socialism (Cowell, 2000).

Four Patterns of Global Activist Communication

A closer examination of the new global issue activism reveals at least four communication-related principles that explain how activists have organized a sustainable politics that moves easily inside and outside of personal, national and governmental contexts. A brief review of these four patterns is followed by an analysis of two different international logo campaigns. The Nike sweatshop labor campaign is an ongoing fifteen year effort by a shifting network of activists to use communication power to force Nike to adopt more responsible labor standards after the company pioneered a winning global business model using foreign contract suppliers to evade governmental labor regulations. The Microsoft consumer protection campaign involves a fluid network of business competitors, consumer advocacy organizations, computer policy associations and hackers who have employed various attacks on corporate image to create a public relations context for governmental regulatory politics in North America, Japan and the European Union. The four communication patterns that characterize global activism in these and other cases are outlined briefly below, followed by illustrations from the Microsoft and Nike logo campaigns

The Development of Permanent Campaigns

It is often said that we have entered the age of permanent political campaigns, whether waged by elected leaders in order to govern after they win office, or by interest groups to maintain publics to promote their policy agendas. The campaign as a permanent basis of political organization can be traced directly to the changing social conditions of late modern -- globalizing -- societies and their weakened group, party, and ideological bases of political organization and mobilization. Campaigns in such social contexts thus serve more than just the purpose of communicating political messages aimed at achieving political goals. They also become mobilizing and organizing devices in contexts that lack more fundamental organizing mechanisms such as strong parties, formal interest groups, or ideologically defined social movements.

The origins of the consumerist symbolic logic that runs through many of these campaigns can be traced to “corporate” campaigns pioneered largely by American labor unions in the early 1980s. Searching for winning political strategies to compensate for steep membership declines, labor ended up supplementing traditional organizing and strike tactics with communication strategies aimed at threatening the precious images of corporations in the eyes of consumers, investors, journalists, social interest groups and other publics (Manheim, 2001). These corporate campaigns have now spread throughout activist and advocacy circles, being adopted by environmental, health, human rights, as well as by anti-globalization and sustainable development groups and coalitions. For example, Greenpeace waged a successful campaign against the Starkist label to stop the harvesting of tuna with methods that endangered other species. And the relatively small human rights organization Global Women’s Campaign for the Elimination of

Beers, which ultimately agreed to limit the market for the bloody “conflict” diamonds that motivated mercenary armies to establish regimes of terror in crumbling African states (Cowell, 2000).

Some of these campaigns resemble more traditional boycotts in the sense that they are run by relatively centralized organizations or coalitions, and they can be turned off when specified goals are accomplished. However, an increasingly common pattern is for whole activist networks to latch onto particularly ripe targets such as Nike or Microsoft because their heavily advertised and ubiquitous logos stick easily to lifestyle meaning systems. This stickiness of logos helps activists get political messages through to audiences whose attention is limited in matters of politics. Such fruitful communication channels also may induce some players to continue running campaigns even when others leave a network, having declared their goals met. This rise of fluid networks, in contrast to more centralized organizations or coalitions, marks a second distinctive feature of the new global consumer issue activism.

Global Consumer Activists are Networked, Not Centrally Organized

As globalization touches larger numbers of people in different societies, the sheer numbers of organizations and individual players with different points of view also grows. Networking is the ultimate mode of organizing diverse interests (or common interests that have been imbedded in different lifestyle communities and cultures). Beyond its role as a producer of globalization, the Internet also represents a more empowering and personalized communication alternative to mass media, particularly for those who are more comfortable associating in networks than in more conventional interest organizations. For those who have crossed the digital divide, the Internet makes it easier

campaign networks relatively easy (i.e., at low cost) at the level of individual choice, while adding the collective cost of making campaigns less centrally controllable.

Sprawling and often unwieldy networks of organizations and activists are the hallmark of the lifestyle politics and global activism networks that characterize late modern societies.

As campaign membership grows and diversifies, networked node and hub organizations adapt more easily than old-style interest organizations and coalitions to the multiple goals and messages of different players. The Internet not only facilitates communication across intellectually and geographically disparate network elements, but it also provides an organizational structure as the number of nodes, geographic distances, and value differences in a network increase.

The Internet Becomes an Organizational Structure

The organizational impact of the Internet may be limited to extending or amplifying existing organizational routines when e-communication is adapted to conventional organizations such as unions or political parties, or to established political processes such as election campaigns. By contrast, the fluid campaign networks of global issue activism make the Internet itself an organizational structure, as activist networks resemble the fluid nodes and hubs of Internet information flows themselves. The Internet is implicated in the new global activism far beyond reducing the costs of communication, or transcending the geographical and temporal barriers found in other communication media. Most importantly, as noted above, the Internet uniquely facilitates the loosely structured networks and affinity ties of this brand of late modern politics. In other words, the Internet is not only a communication medium among

networked groups, but the fluid patterns of communication – from the branded messages that cross ideological divides to the difficulties of centrally controlling actions -- reflect the loosely linked properties of the new networked politics.

An organizational model of the Internet in global issue activism suggests that its centrality to the relations among players and its importance as a means of mobilizing action increase with: the number of actors and organizations in a network, the diversity of issues and goals, the geographical (e.g., global) reach, and the length of run time for a campaign. Another prediction is that the stability, effectiveness, and strength of member identification with complex (multi-issue, multi-goal campaigns) increase with the emergence of network coordinating hub organizations that use email and web news to keep dynamic networks in communication over time.

Many activist hub organizations have developed to coordinate campaigns across traditional issue and geographical boundaries. For example, the Nike sweatshop campaign has been networked at various times by Global Exchange (www.globalexchange.org) in the United States and by the Clean Clothes coalition based in the Netherlands (www.cleanclothes.org). The WTO protests in Seattle were facilitated by networking organizations such as One World, Public Citizen and Global Exchange, as well as by web consortia that co-sponsored information hubs and clearing sites.

According to a study of organization web sites that were most often linked to by other organization sites at the time of the Seattle protests, the WTO site was the link leader (2129 recorded links), but several protest hubs followed with impressive network links: One World (348); Institute for Global Communications (111), Seattlewto.org, the sponsored site of the NGO coalition (92); and Corporate Watch (74), among others

(Smith and Smythe, 2000). Such internet-work was key to WTO in Seattle, and as Lichbach and Almeida discovered, it was also crucial to the co-production of at least 82 simultaneous demonstrations in other cities (Lichbach and Almeida, 2001). Only 27 of those were in the United States, and the others were in far flung locations such as France, Spain, Holland, Israel, Mexico, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines.

New Media Influence the Mass Media: How Activist Messages Reach Broader Publics

The growing conventional wisdom among communication scholars is that the Internet is changing the way in which news is made. In the early stages of an event or a campaign, the new media provide alternative communication spaces in which information can develop and circulate widely with few of the filters, conventions and editorial standards of the mainstream (and even the alternative) press. An important feature of this new electronic public sphere is that activists are increasingly in control of their own news reports, and can issue them with technologies (e.g., streamed digital voice and video) that in many cases parallel those used by, or even run ahead of, those employed by conventional journalism. Perhaps the most important development for the future of information on the Internet is this rise of activist information organizations that offer radical alternatives to mainstream news both for activists and for anyone else (e.g., mainstream journalists) who may find them in an information search. See, for example, the Independent Media network (www.indymedia.org), which has pioneered live streamed video coverage of global action events, a sort of digital CNN for the new global citizen movement.

It is important to understand that the public spheres created by the Internet and the Web are more than just parallel information universes that exist independently of the traditional mass media. To the contrary, the gate-keeping capacity of the traditional press is weakened when information appears on the Internet, often in breathless fashion, with fewer official sources, and less time for journalists to decide on its news status before competitive pressures to publicize it in mainstream channels become intense. A spectacular example of micro-to-mass media crossover in global activism occurred in the culture-jamming episode involving Jonah Peretti and Nike reported in this volume. As Peretti observed, based on the flood of responses he received, the message first circulated on the Internet among sweatshop activists, culture-jammers and their broader networks of friends through the micromedia of E-mail. Then it made its way to “middle media” sites such as weblogs and webzines. From there, in Peretti’s words, “...something interesting happened. The micromedia message worked its way into the mass media....”

The flow from middle-to-mass media involves the passage of information through networks of differently situated culture producers. For example, when the story hit prominent (middle media) weblogs such as Slashdot (www.slashdot.com) and Plastic (www.plastic.com) it reached the attention of web-based journalists at more prominent middle media sites such as *Salon*, a U.S. on-line magazine that also published the story (www.salon.com). Many mass media journalists look to sites such as Salon and other trend-setting web locations for new ideas. From there it was a short journalistic step to publish Peretti’s Nike sweatshop message in *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, NBC’s *Today Show*, *The Times of London*, and other mainstream news outlets. Canadian media consultant Doug Miller was quoted in *The Financial Times* as saying “I visit 75

boardrooms a year and I can tell you the members of the boards are living in fear of getting their corporate reputations blown away in two months on the Internet.” (Mackin, 2000)

The New Branded Activism: The Cases of Nike and Microsoft

The above communication patterns are illustrated here in two necessarily brief case studies: the Nike sweatshop labor campaign, and the campaign against Microsoft’s alleged restraint of consumer choice and technological innovation. These two campaigns provide useful contrasts between an attempt by one activist network (the Nike campaign) to pressure a company to join standards monitoring systems independently of government brokering, and the other (the anti-Microsoft network) to use logo communication tactics to create a climate of public support for tougher legal and governmental standards. The Nike case reflects the perception of many activists that international labor standards regimes have largely slipped governmental regulation and that organizations such as the International Labor Organization are ineffective advocates. As a result, many sweatshop activists seek to create labor standards monitoring systems that must be sustained and enforced through consumer pressure. Microsoft, by contrast, is an example of a network of players seeking various kinds of standards (consumer protection, business competition, personal privacy, and labor protections) with governmental enforcement.

The examples used in this analysis are based on extensive data gathered by the author and various colleagues¹ on activist campaign networks, the communication strategies used to frame political messages in terms of corporate images, and the media coverage generated by those message framing strategies. The period reported here for the

Microsoft campaign spans the years from 1996-1999 a time in which an identifiable activist network emerged connecting diverse organizations with common information links, jointly sponsored conferences and press events, overlapping board of director memberships, and coordinated efforts to introduce negative publicity about Microsoft business and consumer practices into the mass media and government policy circles in the United States, Japan and Europe. The examples from the Nike campaign reported here reflect network activity as described in activist accounts and (in the more recent period) documented in Internet searches between 1987 and 2000. An empirical assessment of network communication strategies is based on a content analysis of Nike coverage in two leading American newspapers (The Washington Post and The New York Times) between 1991 and 1999. The discussion of these cases is organized in terms of the four patterns of global activist communication identified above

The Development of Permanent Campaigns

Both the Microsoft and the Nike campaigns are longstanding efforts that have become more or less permanent campaigns. The Nike effort originated in the late 1980s and gained some public attention in the early 1990s largely through the efforts of Jeff Ballinger, a labor activist who began trying to place news stories based on his studies of conditions in the Indonesian factories that contracted to produce shoes for the Nike label. The campaign took an important turn in the mid 1990s with the entry of Global Exchange, an activist networking organization that coordinates and runs campaigns in various areas of environmental, human rights and labor politics. As Ballinger noted, "Global Exchange turned my rundown, VW bus of a campaign into an 18-wheeler"

(Bullert, 2000: 7). Global Exchange contributed resources, public relations skills, and an activist network that resulted in sustained mainstream media coverage of Nike labor practices abroad and profit margins at home. When the company perceived its logo being threatened with critical news coverage, it made the first steps toward independent monitoring of labor conditions in the factories.

Global Exchange left the campaign after “Nike blinked” and acknowledged responsibility for its labor standards (Herbert, 1998). Typical of networked campaigns, new organizations such as the student-led Workers’ Rights Consortium soon entered the network to push Nike to the next level of accountability – the acceptance of an independent standards monitoring system. The chronology and development of these and other aspects of this long running campaign both in America and other nations can be found in Bullert (2000), and in the chronologies by Ballinger on web site of the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement (www.engagedcitizen.org).

The Microsoft campaign is also more than a decade old, beginning with large-scale hacker attacks on Microsoft products, and active web networks aimed at branding the company as a predatory threat to openness and innovation in software development and a free Internet environment. Business competitors and workers filed various lawsuits dating from the early 1990s, and those suits increased in number and legal coordination until the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) and 19 states filed a federal anti-trust action against the company. The business opponents -- dubbed N.O.I.S.E., for Netscape, Oracle, IBM, Sun, and Everyone Else in the insider accounts of the campaign-- provided major funding, core elements of the DOJ legal brief, as well as sharing board members, information, and legal strategy with many of the organizations in the campaign.

It would be a mistake to overestimate the role of the business competitors and underestimate the legitimizing and authoritative importance of consumer groups, unions, computer professionals, and prominent intellectuals such as then Harvard Law professor Lawrence Lessig, an outspoken critic of Microsoft who served as an expert for the judge in the initial federal trial. Among the key players were various consumer and policy groups, several of which were affiliated with consumer activist Ralph Nader. This wing of the campaign added an important “high ground” consumer justice theme that deflected claims that the government lawsuit, and the campaign in general, were solely the creatures of Microsoft business opponents. Like the Nike campaign, the diverse players in the Microsoft network show no signs of letting go of a logo that offered such a great publicity vehicle for communicating a host of messages. The barrage of legal challenges from consumer groups and business competitors has more recently been joined by privacy groups and labor unions attacking Microsoft on various new fronts. The flexibility of logo politics enables campaigns to be joined by diverse interests, all sharing the common belief that a company is a threat to their various causes. A chronicle of the early years of the campaign is found in Bennett and Manheim (2001).

Global Consumer Activists are Networked, Not Centrally Organized

The Microsoft campaign is a classic example of a large and multi-purposed coalition of players, including business competitors, consumer groups, labor, and computer professionals, with hackers playing more shadowy, and less coordinated roles in the background. A partial look at the Microsoft campaign network is provided in Figure 1.² This represents only a partial look at the players in the campaign, and just the

part of the network (circa 1998) aimed at subjecting Microsoft to business and consumer protection standards imposed by the courts and advocated by the U.S. Justice Department.

The links shown in Figure 1 represent overlapping board memberships, funding relationships, keynote addresses at conferences, links on web sites, or authorship and Web site locations of expert White Papers containing the bases for allegations against Microsoft. The full network of all organizations, web rings, and related information and news would include thousands of players and connections in inordinately complex network patterns. Although the International network of organizations is far less developed than the American network, the domestic partners have created international variants of the campaign aimed at government regulatory bodies and the press in Europe and Asia.

Figure 1 Here

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The Nike network also contains an extraordinary number of organizations, many of which exist largely as Internet presences to exchange information, coordinate actions, and specify political goals. A quick search in May, 2001 of Internet sites with either an exclusive or a partial Nike focus (along with themes about international labor, human rights, and environmental abuses, and the need for standards) yielded 58 sites. The sites were more often based in the United States (32), but they were also located in Asia (3), Canada (3), and in Europe (18 sites in 5 different nations).³ As is typical of consumerist

campaign networks, there were different messages and goals, ranging from “clean clothes” certification, to demands for independent procedures for accountability on labor standards in Nike factories. (For an on-line sample of these sites, go to www.engagedcitizen.org and click on research, global citizen issue campaigns, Nike).

The Internet as Organizational Structure

Both the Nike and Microsoft campaigns are characteristic of networked politics in that they require or at least prosper with the entry of network coordinating organizations. What is interesting about the new global activism is that a network may contain many of these hub organizations, and they are often not particularly large, resource-rich, or long-established. In many cases, they are relatively small and Internet focused, and they are often created precisely to coordinate action and communication among activists. Many of these network hubs organizations move from campaign to campaign. As noted earlier, Global Exchange (www.globalexchange.org) played an important role in coordinating the Nike campaign, after deciding that it had moved Nike in the direction of adopting some labor standards and monitoring, moved on to other consumerist issues such as fair trade coffee.

In the Microsoft campaign, several network coordinating organizations emerged, including Netaction (www.netaction.org), which was created initially as the Internet hub for this campaign. Netaction later moved on to other consumerist Internet causes (such as privacy) after playing an information archiving, publicity and activist outreach role similar to Global Exchange in the Nike campaign. When some members of the network became divided over a weaker set of regulatory standards proposed by the U.S. government in 2002, Netaction returned to an active information and strategy

coordinating role in the campaign once again. Other key organizations in the network included the Consumer Project on Technology, a Nader organization, and Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, which hosted an important speech by legal expert Lawrence Lessig at a national meeting, and whose members provided legitimizing endorsements for various goals of the campaign. Operating at the fringes of the network were the players less likely to be credible sources of consumer rhetoric such as the large Silicon Valley software companies.

Perhaps the most important organizational feature of the Internet in new consumerist activism is that it enables diverse wings of a campaign network to maintain contact in ways that allow different issues and political perspectives to co-exist without threatening organizational coherence as directly as differences might threaten more centralized, face-to-face coalitions. On most days, conservative Senator Orrin Hatch and consumer activist Ralph Nader would not find themselves in the same political universe. Yet they have been comfortably occupying network space together for years in the Microsoft campaign, with only a few degrees of separation between them.

New Media Influence Mass Media: How Activist Consumer Messages Reach Broader Publics

The Jonah Peretti Nike culture-jamming example noted earlier, and detailed in a chapter in this volume, illustrates a key property of new forms of consumer activist, Internet-based politics: an “under the radar” quality. Electronically driven stories contain the potential to scandalize a campaign target with a blitz of electronic information that rises from an activist information chain, to more general electronic sites (blogs and webzines) to the mainstream press that monitors

Many news stories now begin on the Internet as catch phrases and anecdotes that take on a life of their own when thousands and even millions of networked citizens hit their send or forward keys. For example, the brilliant stroke of naming Monsanto's sterile seed "The Terminator" elevated anti-Monsanto campaign messages into mainstream news around the globe.

In the Microsoft campaign, the underground (Internet) terminology for Microsoft and its embodiment in Bill Gates easily crossed over into mainstream reporting. Derogatory terms and comparisons leaked out of Internet chats, networked campaign sites, and partisan webzines, and surfaced in mainstream news accounts reporting what opponents were saying about Microsoft: that the goal of the company was to "crush competition," that it was known by opponents as "the Seattle Slasher," and that Bill Gates was the latter day incarnation of Robber Baron icon, John D. Rockefeller.

A more elaborate case of information moving from new media to traditional news organizations comes from the Nike campaign. Countless stories of worker abuse and bad conditions in Nike factories had long circulated across the Internet, providing an authenticating context for publicity organized by Global Exchange after it entered the campaign in 1996. The communication strategy combined Internet mobilization (turning out crowds for touring Indonesian factory workers at Niketown locations) with traditional public relations techniques such as press background briefings, press conferences, well-produced rallies, and other pseudo-events designed to fit news values. The result was to connect Indonesian workers with journalists around America in ways that produced dozens of repetitions of a detailed story about heroic workers battling a mean-spirited

company. The result was a huge boost in national press coverage of the Nike scandal on terms dictated largely by the activists and the workers themselves (Bullert, 2000).

After the entry of Global Exchange in the campaign network, coverage of Nike in the leading American papers (the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*) shifted from a business section story about contract factories as the brilliant new model for business success in the fashion industry, to reporting on damaging consumer and sweatshop labor messages in the main news, sports and opinion sections of the papers. Figure 2 provides an overview ten years of Nike coverage in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, showing the evolution of the major and minor news themes in the articles. The data are based on a Nexis-Lexis search of the *Post* and the *Times* for items containing the terms *Nike* and *Indonesia* between 1991-2000. The general themes in these stories were coded by graduate research assistants according how they fit into the following news frames: **business frames** describing production, sales, marketing, and profit issues; **consumer frames** describing popular responses to Nike brands, styles, and product endorsers like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods; and **sweatshop frames** describing bad labor conditions in Nike factories (corruption, pay, child labor, abuses against workers, reprisals against union efforts), along with various protest activities involving these problems. Each story was coded for a major frame and a minor frame, thus making it possible for a sweatshop story to have a business angle, or a business story to have a consumer angle.⁴

The “Niketown worker tour” communication strategy employed by Global Exchange resulted in the dominance of sweatshop framing both as the main focus of stories, and as the most common minor theme in stories with either a consumer or a

business focus. A quick look at Figure 2 also shows that before the entry of Global Exchange and its logo campaign strategy, most previous stories about Nike in Indonesia were more likely to be single theme reports on business trends, consumer behavior, or (occasionally) a labor problem in contract factories. The predominant Nike story of the early 1990s was a business success tale in which consumers liked the brand, and the company reaped huge profits by contracting its production out to cheap labor suppliers. By the end of the decade, however, after Global Exchange took on the central coordinating role in the campaign, the Nike story became dramatically different: a tale of dubious business morality in which consumers were gouged for expensive shoes produced by exploited workers in corrupt global export and free trade zones.

As Figure 2 indicates, Global Exchange communication strategies succeeded in making “sweatshop” the major news theme in coverage of Nike in the two leading U.S. papers. Moreover, the sweatshop theme also became the most common subtext or minor theme in coverage that focused primarily on business or consumer aspects of the Nike story. It was this systematic linking of the Nike image with the unpleasant business of sweatshop labor that led Nike CEO Phil Knight to “blink,” and admit that the company had some responsibility for its labor standards.

Figure 2 Here

(Figure Located at End of Document)

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of both the Microsoft and Nike campaigns is that they challenge the conventional wisdom that activist messages have trouble getting

through the news gates in positive form without first being legitimated by government officials or high status news sources (Bennett, 2003; Gamson, 1992). Part of the explanation for this success is that logos are already big news. Media organizations are increasingly tuned to the consumer interests of their audiences, with celebrity titillation to so-called “news you can use” increasingly filling the news space with health, fashion trends, new products, investment tips, celebrity gossip, glamorous lives of the CEOs, and other lifestyle features. Thus, “trouble in logo-land” becomes an irresistible spin on corporate stories that are already followed by consumers, investors, and other attentive publics. Packaging politically challenging messages in the context of these consumer values seems to provide positive media access for radical messages that might not even have been admitted through the news gates in an earlier era (or, if they were they were let into the news, they were more likely to be linked to leftists, radicals, environmentalists, or other more easily stereotyped political sources).

Conclusions about the Future of Global Consumer Activism

These cases illustrate the potential of consumerist politics in globalizing societies. The consumer coding of political action becomes an effective means of telling distant and often complex political stories about labor exploitation, human rights, environmental issues, and bad business practices. Branding these messages help get them through the lifestyle meaning screens of many ardent consumers. This communication strategy may also help make consumers aware of the larger political story of branding itself: that the brand, and more generally the branded consumer, has become the product in the

becomes hugely profitable through the process of branding consumers to pay a premium to express their identities through attractive fashion and lifestyle images (Klein, 1999; Turow, 1997; www.adbusters.org).

Logo campaigns and the larger cause networks from which they derive turn local sites of consumption (protests at shopping locations), politics (hearings by legislative and regulatory agencies), media (news and sports reporting about Nike offenses), and education (high school economics curricula on globalization of production, sports brands, and profits) into venues for exposing corporate practices and making new democratic accountability demands to regulate those practices. It is important to understand that these campaigns need not create large shifts in public opinion or consumer behavior in order to be successful. The main objective of many communication campaigns based on consumer symbolism is create a symbolic public as a backdrop against which to target much smaller but more decisive political audiences: government regulators, members of Congress, journalists, or the stakeholders in a company, such as board members or stockholders. Creating dramatic news images of a once powerful but now troubled company or its brand may focus the attention of these strategic audiences and motivate them to take various kinds of actions such as holding hearings, bringing lawsuits, or selling shares. The threat of possible brand damage or corporate image of problems may be enough to force the target company to modify its behavior, or even join a standards monitoring regime that may transform an entire industry.

Despite their successes, corporate campaigns run by large activist networks also illustrate how the new consumerist politics may suffer unwieldy coordination problems among diverse coalition partners with different agendas. For example, the influx of large

and networks of activists running through political territories once occupied in more orderly fashion by a small number of rights, environmental, consumer protection, labor and development NGOs presents an interesting strategic dilemma for movement organizing. In some ways, the goals of these global networks may continue to build upon traditional international NGO activist aims: instilling human rights norms in rogue nations, promoting sustainable national economic development and democratic institutions, or winning concessions from multinational corporations or corrupt governments on behalf of exploited workers. At the same time, the appeal of those earlier global campaigns was often that they were managed centrally by one or a small coalition of NGOs, and pressure was strategically applied to campaign targets until specified goals were reached (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). The ability to stop campaigns not only reinforced the credibility of activist organizations, but it also rewarded the compliance of targeted companies. The recent entry of large numbers of less commonly purposed, networked players increases the prospects for unstable coalitions, greater communication noise, lack of clarity about goals, and poor movement idea-framing.

In short, the new global consumer activism may be a sign of changes in definitions of citizenship and democracy, but it also presents a dilemma for traditional organizations that were more able to control consumer actions—turning them on and off—in the process of attaining specific political goals. Key questions about the future stability of this movement include: who is in charge of campaigns, how are campaign goals defined, what constitutes success, and how to stop others from targeting the same corporation (beating a dead logo) after it has satisfied particular demands. The capacity of

networked campaigns to resolve these issues will determine the future of an historic moment in the evolution of democracy and citizenship.

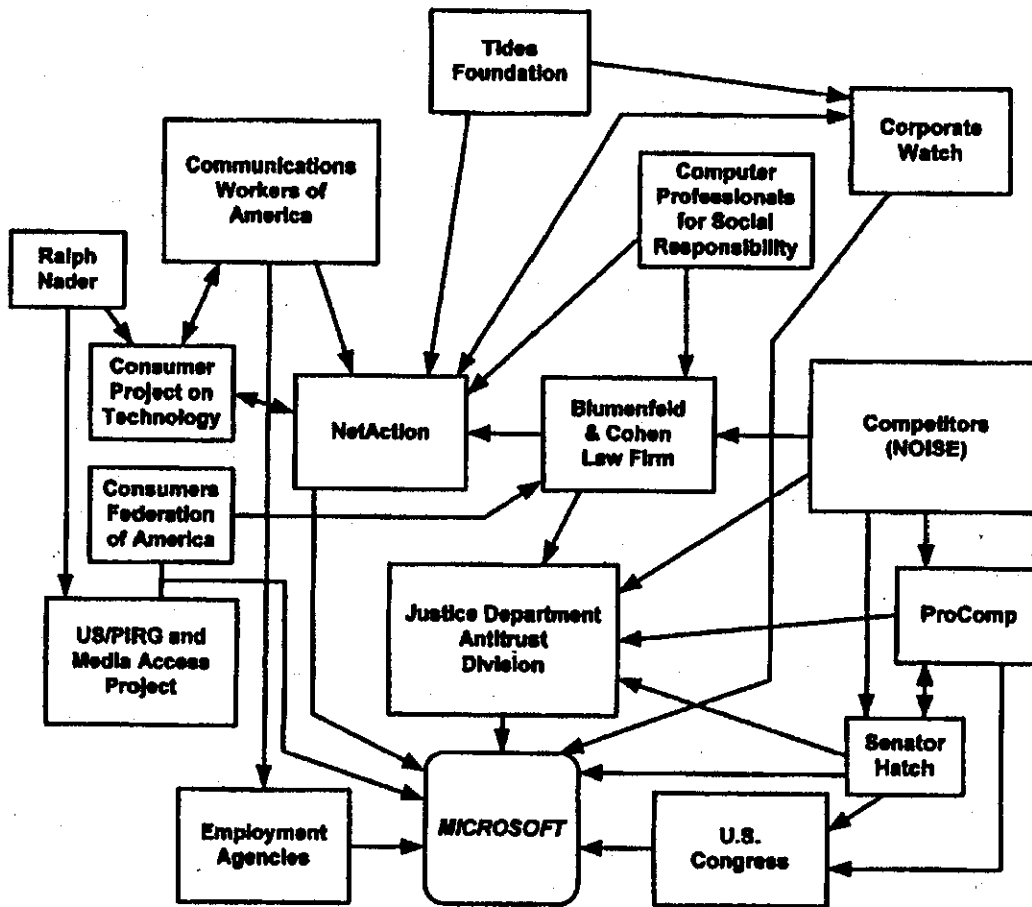
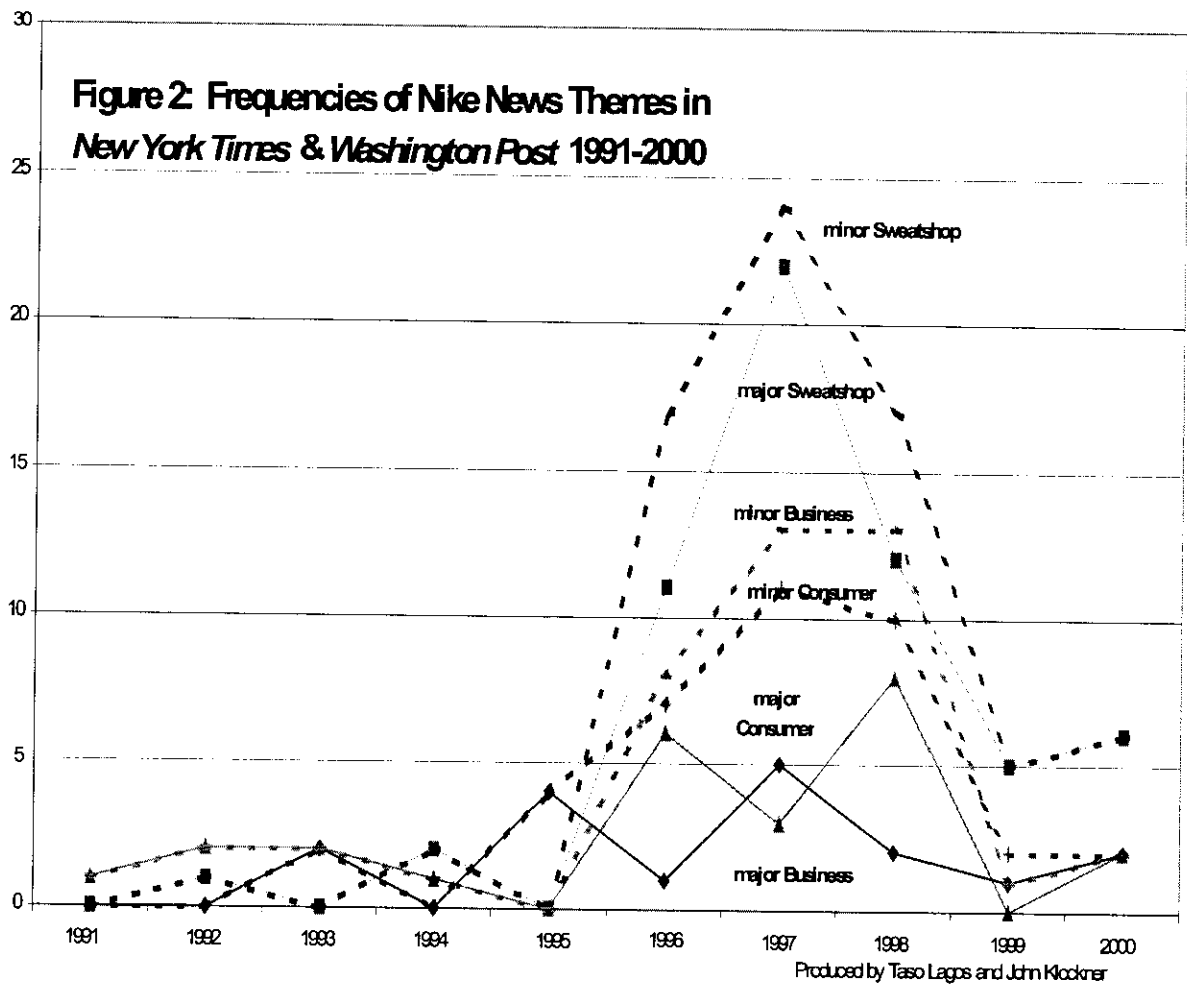


Figure 1: A Small Portion of The Microsoft Network, Circa 1997-1998

(Developed with Jarol Manheim)



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Endnotes

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² This figure was produced collaboratively with and used with the permission of Jarol B. Manheim. See *The Death of a Thousand Cuts* (2001), p. 154.

³ Google searches were run on the terms Nike and sweatshop, with sales and sports sites excluded. English, German, and Swedish searches were run. Other languages would have likely generated more hits.

⁴ Coder reliabilities for major and minor versions of the three basic story frames were all in the 80%+ range.