ANALYSING THE INTERNET AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CASE OF *WOMENSLINK*

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Abstract

This article analyses alternative media on the Internet media forms produced by social movements and grassroots groups. A framework for analysing alternative media on the Internet is devised using a wide range of theoretical literature, in particular theories of the public sphere and of social movements. Within a public sphere context, alternative media on the Internet could offer an alternative to mass media by using different production practices, such as those fostering capacities for reflection on the experiences of media audiences. Within a social movement context, alternative media on the Internet could help movement actors reach their political aims, or help maintain a movement by supporting alternative forms of self-understanding, friendship networks and communities. Empirical research using the framework was conducted over a two-and-a-half year period on the Womenslink mailing list that linked women's organisations in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The findings contribute to further understanding of the Internet and the transnational public sphere.

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Introduction

The "carnival against capitalism" in London and the orchestrated demonstrations at the WTO Summit in Seattle in 1999, and similar events in Prague, Millau and Davos in 2000 and 2001, stimulated widespread interest in how social movements use the Internet. In one of many media reports, the BBC asserted that: "History might have been different if Karl Marx had been able to send emails" (BBC Online 1999).

During this same period, although rarely making headlines, the number of grassroots groups using the Internet grew rapidly as the cost of using the Internet dropped. In villages, towns and cities in the developed nations, dozens, hundreds or thousands of community groups, women's organisations, and other voluntary organisations are linking up through the Internet to provide information, services and mutual support and draw attention to the needs and concerns of their communities or of particular groups within it.

Both these phenomena — Internet use by global social movements and grassroots community organising through Internet networking — are continuing to grow with the increasing penetration of the Internet across the globe. The implications for the future of the public sphere in Europe and wider internationally are wide-ranging and shaped by the various contexts of transnational, global and grassroots organising. How can communications and media researchers understand these activities? Specifically, how can they be explored through empirical research?

This article addresses this research concern by developing a framework for analysing alternative media on the Internet which may be useful in a wide range of social movement and grassroots organising contexts. Using this framework, empirical research was conducted over a two-and-a-half year period on *Womenslink*, an Internet mailing list linking women's organisations in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The findings highlight a number of key issues for the Internet and the transnational public sphere.

Towards an Analytical Framework for Alternative Media on the Internet

The basis for the analytical framework is that media forms on the Internet are being used by social movements as alternative media. Email, Web pages, and Internet mailing lists and discussion groups can be placed alongside other alternative media forms — such as alternative newspapers, community radio, newsletters and photocopied leaflets — that social movement actors and community groups have been using for many years in various ways.

The analytical framework for researching alternative media on the Internet attempts to categorise the main elements of interest to researchers and to contextualise these elements within current media and social theories, highlighting the key questions for empirical research. Alternative media — media outside the mainstream — remain largely unexamined in media and communications theory but can be situated within two theoretical areas: the public sphere and social movements.

The first element of the analytical framework is therefore the link with the *public sphere*. Public sphere theory has been central to contemporary understanding of the media and opinion-formation in liberal democratic states. Commentators have

pointed out that in a liberal democracy, public opinion acts as "the ultimate source of authority for broadly setting a legislative agenda" (Zarat 1996, 1500) and that "the stability of modern governments is especially dependent on opinion" (Koivisto and Valiverronen 1996, 19). A central question for the analytical framework is the extent to which alternative media on the Internet are linked with the mainstream media and the wider public sphere. A second question is the extent to which alternative media themselves function as a public sphere or alternative public spheres.

The link with alternative media can be discussed in the context of the multiple public spheres debate. As conceived by Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989), key elements of the public sphere are: universal access, reliable sources of information, voluntary participation, rational argument, the freedom to express opinions, and the freedom to discuss matters of the state and participate outside institutional roles. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972/1993) argued that the bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas is a mechanism for exclusion of certain social groups and suggested that there are multiple public spheres. Later, Nancy Fraser (1992) put forward the concept that a single public sphere is not always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics because in societies characterised by unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination, parity of participation in public debate is not possible. Fraser believes that existing inequalities are exacerbated in a single public sphere with no alternative arenas for debate amongst the excluded, and that alternative arenas revolve around alternative media. John Keane (1995) argued along similar lines that the spheres of alternative media could be conceptualised as micro-public spheres. On the other hand, critics such as Lisa McLaughlin (1993) maintained that alternative media conceived as separate from the mainstream fail to challenge the hegemonic structures of mainstream media; once separate from mainstream debate, alternative media risk developing alternative dominant social relations and structures. Similarly, Nicholas Garnham (1992) believes that there must be a single unified public sphere for democracy to function. Garnham does not address alternative media but he rejects the pluralist public spheres framework, positing that "cultural relativism and a democratic polity are simply incompatible" (1992, 369).

Social movement theory situates alternative media in two distinct ways: how they facilitate political participation and their role in building social networks. A second element of the analytical framework is therefore the link between alternative media on the Internet and *political participation*. A central question is the extent to which these alternative media forms link with the mainstream political process or with wider movement and organising processes. John Downing (1995) sees alternative media as politically dissident media with the potential to impact on mainstream political debates and processes. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1997) found that the production of "small" media in Iran helped to support an oppositional discourse that led to mass mobilisation. Nancy Fraser (1992) highlighted the role of alternative media in sustaining and developing movements outside the mainstream public sphere. John Keane (1995) discussed how alternative media helped sustain micro-public spheres of actors developing alternative discourse to the mainstream. Manuel Castells (1997) has suggested that the Internet will be most useful to social movements with clear mainstream political goals.

A third element in the analytical framework is the *link between local and transnational or global*. A number of theorists have looked at the globalisation of the

Internet in the context of linking global and local actors. Howard Frederick (1993) believes that the APC Internet networks are helping to build continental and global resistance movements. Similarly, Annabelle Sreberny (1998) in her analysis of "globalisation from below" believes the women's movement is using the Internet to build global networks of resistance. On the other hand, writers such as Mike Featherstone (1993) have argued that increased cultural flows on global communications networks will not necessarily lead to greater tolerance but rather could encourage the strengthening of local identities. Manuel Castells (1997) believes that the process of globalisation encourages the formation of "cultural communes" which are defensive reactions to the forces of globalisation, and that alternative communications are essential to keeping these communes intact. In the context of linking European actors transnationally, Philip Schlesinger (1999) and others in this volume have questioned the extent to which media forms can transcend the boundaries of European nations without a pre-existing strong transnational European political culture.

Alternative media can also be used to build the social networks that are an important foundation for social movements. The analytical framework includes this as the *social capital* element of alternative media on the Internet. Alberto Melucci (1986, 1989) suggested that independent public spaces could help to maintain a movement by providing alternative forms of self-understanding, friendship networks and communities. Social capital, as conceived by Pierre Bourdieu (1984/1993) and James Coleman (1994) is a resource inherent in family and community relations. Drawing from the work of Coleman, Eric Riedel et al. (1998) believe that the capacity for building social capital through Internet networks depends on trust among participants. Craig Calhoun (1998) believes that the usefulness of the Internet can be measured by the extent to which it binds individuals to each other in dense networks or creates public spaces where people from different communities can work out their differences. Jan Fernback (1997) has argued that individual identity is formed partly though contribution to the greater collective and that identity-formation in cyberspace could be linked to the structure of social relations in online communications, in particular the development of group norms for this activity.

The analytical framework also includes analysis of the socio-economic and structural elements that shape the *profile of the participants* of alternative media on the Internet, including the restraints and barriers to accessing the technology. The Internet has become increasingly privatised, market-driven, and deregulated. Critical communications theory suggests that because the Internet is regulated not by government policy but rather by private interests motivated by profits, Internet access will be highly uneven for different socio-economic groups. Indeed, research has found that on a global scale, significant inequities exist regarding Internet access, with access in Third World countries largely confined to the upper and upper-middle classes. Internet access and infrastructure reflects the income disparities and inequalities between regions and countries and within countries. Most Internet host computers are located in the US, and within that country, significantly different levels of access exist according to socio-economic grouping, with primary restraints to Internet access being low income and low levels of formal education. Uneven Internet access presents an obvious challenge for alternative media production on the Internet. Alternative media aim to be as grassroots as possible and to reflect the experiences of those for whom they are produced. These

are often the same groups and communities largely excluded from the Internet because of structural restraints and barriers to access. This situation reflects Fraser's (1992) criticism about structural exclusion from the public sphere.

The analytical framework also needs to consider the socio-economic and structural elements that shape the *production* processes of these new media forms on the Internet, in particular the extent to which they represent an alternative to the production practices of the mainstream media. David Sholle (1995) believes that too often alternative media reproduce the bourgeois practices of the dominant media, regarding their audiences as consumers rather than emphasising production based on collaborative and democratic participation and public involvement in organising and producing media texts. Similarly, Lisa McLaughlin (1993) believes that the production processes of alternative media should be examined for evidence of reproducing the hegemonic production practices of the mainstream media.

Finally, alternative media *content* is the seventh element of the analytical framework. One question is whether the alternative media content reflects the lived experience of the media audience. David Sholle (1995) has argued that a central concern for alternative media is the extent to which they reflect the audience's lived experiences; his analysis follows on from the work of Negt and Kluge (1972/1993), who criticised the mass media for its creation of communities of consumers by blocking experiences of everyday life. Sholle believes that alternative media could counter this process by fostering capacities for reflecting upon experience and imagining a different future. A second question is whether the alternative media content challenges dominant codes and tests new ideas. Alberto Melucci (1996) believes that the subversive power of social movements lies in their ability to reverse the symbolic order through alternative use of symbolic codes; alternative media could be used to alter and evade the codes imposed by mass society. Melucci also believes that social movements are characterised by submerged, latent networks, in which activities occurred that could best be described as laboratories of experience, "with experiments conducted on existing relations of power." His analysis is echoed in John Keane's conceptualisation of micro public spheres (1995) and Nancy Fraser's vision of "subaltern publics" (1992). A related question is whether the media forms on the Internet can organise an audience capable of criticising and correcting the media content. Peter Waterman (1990) raised this issue in the context of internationalist media, the concern being that many international communication projects in the labour movement have been designed and run not by workers but by university-educated intellectuals.

In summary, the framework contains seven elements. Three are characteristics of alternative media forms: the participants, the production process, and the content. Four elements concern the wider contexts of the media activity: links with the public sphere, with political participation, with social capital, and linking local and global. In the remainder of this article, this framework will be used to discuss the findings of the empirical research on *Womenslink*.

Research Methodology

The research grew from an earlier Dublin City University research project, The Voluntary Sector in the Information Age, which investigated computer and Internet

use by community and voluntary organisations in Ireland (O'Donnell, Trench and Ennals 1998; Trench and O'Donnell 1997). As part of that project, the researcher conducted a focus group of women's organisations at the Omagh Women's Centre in July 1997; at the end of that session, participants were keen to use the Internet to network with each other. The *Womenslink* mailing list (discussion group) was then set up on a Dublin City University server computer and co-managed by the researcher and the WRDA (Women's Resource and Development Agency) in Belfast, until the end of 1999.

The mailing list technology allows a *Womenslink* member to send an email to the central server, which distributes it automatically to all *Womenslink* members. The original seven *Womenslink* member organisations included the primary women's organisations and networks in Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland; all have paid staff and professional premises. As the number of *Womenslink* participants grew, the profile changed to include a wider range of women's groups and women's sector participants. After the research period ended, the WRDA assumed full responsibility for *Womenslink* in early 2000, and it was moved from DCU to a commercial server. It continues to expand and link women's organisations in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Currently *Womenslink* has 39 members in Ireland, north and south — mostly women's organisations and women's centres and also individuals working in the women's sector.

The *Womenslink* research methodology was rooted in a participatory approach — including researcher's involvement with the WRDA and the *Womenslink* list during the 124-week research period — combined with other methods: (1) in-depth interviews conducted with 14 staff members of the seven original *Womenslink* member organisations; (2) content analysis of all 500 *Womenslink* messages produced during the research period, including quantitative and qualitative analysis of the texts and analysis of participation rates and patterns; and (3) a feedback session, again at the Omagh Women's Centre, with staff of the *Womenslink* member organisations at the end of the research period.

The Case of *Womenslink*

The *Womenslink* findings will be discussed using the seven elements of the analytical framework: links with the public sphere, political participation, social capital, and linking local with transnational and global; and the participants, production process and content. The discussion forms a number of research questions under each analytical element, summarised in Chart 1.

Links with the Public Sphere(s)

The first element of the framework is links with the public sphere(s): the relationships between alternative media forms on the Internet and the wider public sphere, and also the complexities of alternative media forms on the Internet as public spheres in themselves.

The *Womenslink* content analysis found that very little content — only one percent overall — was clearly linked to the mainstream media. This included a press release, two messages criticising mainstream media coverage, and two messages advocating contacting sympathetic women journalists on the *Belfast Telegraph* newspaper. As well, a notable feature of many *Womenslink* messages, particularly opin-

Chart 1: Framework for Analysing Alternative Media on the Internet

A: Links with wider context

1. Public sphere(s)

*To what extent do the alternative media on the Internet reflect, complement or extend the mainstream media and public sphere activities and goals of the participants?
*Do they operate with reliable sources of information?
*Are participants able to participate as private individuals and freely exchange ideas?
*Do the public sphere aspects change over time?
*What are the influences of commercial forces?

2. Political participation

*To what extent do the alternative media on the Internet reflect, complement or extend the political orientation, activities and goals of the participants?

3. Local and transnational or global

*To what extent do the alternative media on the Internet reflect, complement or extend existing global networks, communications and relations of support?

4. Social capital

*To what extent do the alternative media on the Internet reflect, complement or extend existing networks and relations of support?
*To what extent do participants believe they help create and consolidate common identities and communities?
*Do they help build trust among participants?
*Do they help build organisational capacity?

B: Media participants, production process and content

5. Participants

*Who participates in the alternative media production, in terms of their socio-economic profile and other factors?
*What are the restraints and barriers to accessing the technology, by individuals, by organisations, and within organisations?

6. Production process

*What is the media form or process and to what extent does it allow interaction between sender and receiver?
*To what extent is there fluidity or interaction between media forms?
*Is the media production democratic and participative or rather do some participants dominate the process?
*Are rules of production agreed and respected by participants?
*Who owns the media technology and what is the owner's influence on the production process?
*What are the changes in production practices over time?

7. Content

*Does the content reflect the lived experiences of the media audience?
*Does the content challenge dominant codes, use alternative codes, create or test new ideas?
*Is the audience capable of criticising and correcting the media content?
*Do these aspects of the content change over time?

ions exchanged, was that very little appeared to be informed by the mainstream media, with the writers preferring instead to focus on their personal experiences of the issue. In the interviews with staff of *Womenslink* member organisations, none mentioned press releases as a means of disseminating information about their activities, indicating that the *Womenslink* member organisations rarely used the mainstream media to publicise their activities. The interviews suggested that low mainstream media use was linked to the perception that the mainstream media coverage of women's issues is not sympathetic or informed.

Sources of information on *Womenslink* were generally reliable. Most of the content was information about issues or events of interest to participants, posted by the organisations working on these issues or events. The *Womenslink* format also allowed participants to correct erroneous information previously circulated on the list.

An important finding was that discussion by *Womenslink* members on topical issues diminished as the *Womenslink* membership grew, with the content becoming increasingly impersonal and detached. The interviews found that in many cases, staff was inhibited from sending messages to *Womenslink* because they did not know the other staff members on the mailing list. At the *Womenslink* feedback session, participants described feeling not free to express their personal opinions because their opinion would be perceived as the position of the organisation they worked for. All the participants at the *Womenslink* feedback session agreed that it was difficult or impossible to express an opinion publicly on any contentious issue on *Womenslink* or other public fora because the opinion of the staff member would be perceived as an official expression from her organisation. Staff believed that because email was a written format, it could be widely distributed and possibly be used out of context in the future.

One key area related to the public sphere not explored by the *Womenslink* research was the possible effects of commercial influences. *Womenslink* was largely buffered from commercial concerns during the research period because it was produced on a university server with no costs involved for any participants. When the research period ended, *Womenslink* was moved to a commercial server (Egroups.com). In exchange for providing free mailing list facilities for *Womenslink*, this commercial server sends out advertisements as part of every *Womenslink* message produced and distributed; it would be useful to know if and how this type of commercialisation of the mailing list public sphere could influence communications on the list.

Links with Political Participation

The second element of the analytical framework is the links between alternative media on the Internet and political participation. Looking first at the *Womenslink* content analysis, only nine percent of content overall had links to mainstream politics, with the levels of this kind of content staying consistent over time. Most of the *Womenslink* members during the research period were based in Northern Ireland, and so most of this mainstream political content concerned politics and policies in Northern Ireland. There was also content on mainstream politics in the Republic and the Third World, and a small percentage on European Union issues.

In general, the little political discussion on *Womenslink* that transcended the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic was grounded in aspects of political culture that the two jurisdictions had in common. For example, some cross-border discussion occurred early in the life of *Womenslink* about the presidential elections in the Republic. The President of Ireland, the head of state but not of government, has a largely ceremonial role; four women were candidates for the position. Discussion on *Womenslink* focused on Mary McAleese, a woman from Northern Ireland who was the leading candidate and the eventual winner, and her past record on women's issues in Northern Ireland. Other common areas of

political culture that transcended the Irish border included information and discussion of cross-border funding opportunities for projects and programmes based on the Programme for Peace and Reconciliation agreed by both governments and part-funded by the European Union.

Content on political issues was often presented as an aside to another discussion, or in a distanced way, with few personal opinions on the issues raised, or occasionally in a humorous way. The content on politics in Northern Ireland was also often presented within a feminist perspective or focused on women's issues, such as content about the political party, the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, and the participation of women's organisations in a political structure, the Civic Forum. Within this feminist or women's perspective, the "political" topics could merge with the "personal" in a seamless blending of "public" and "private" spheres. The exchange below from early in the life of *Womenslink* about Monica McWilliams, the leader of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, is an example of this fluidity between spheres.

"Hi everyone! I have heard rumours too that Monica McWilliams is standing in South Belfast. But the really exciting news as far as I'm concerned is that [name of Womenslink member] is about to give birth! Can you keep us posted on this?" (message #102, May 30 1998).

"Hello Everyone. I'm not sure if the word has gone round yet but [name] had a baby boy, 7.5 lbs born on 31 May at 6:30am!" (message #104, June 2 1998).

"That's great news about [name]. Give her our heartiest congratulations. I hope they are well. [Name of second woman] has been in the hospital for the past month as they were afraid she would go into labour early. She has another month to go. She's in good form but a bit fed up. That's the latest from Blacklion" (message #105, June 2 1998).

"Hi everyone! Congratulations to [name] on the birth of her new baby. How is she? What are they calling him? I have heard rumours too that Monica McWilliams is standing in South Belfast" (message #106, June 2 1998).

Significantly, participants at the *Womenslink* feedback session said it was difficult to discuss mainstream political issues on *Womenslink*. They described living in a culture in which key political issues — such as positions on the political compact, the Good Friday Agreement — could not be easily discussed in public fora. Participants described a culture of fear and silence in Northern Ireland which inhibited discussion of political issues among people unknown to each other. All the staff of *Womenslink* member organisations agreed it was difficult to discuss such issues on *Womenslink* because, not knowing all the other members on the list, they were not sure how their opinion would be received. Staff members believed that "people have a fear historically of where the information goes," that information taken out of context could insult or offend, that people were "targeted for your opinion around here," and that they were not free to express an opinion.

The friendly nature of much of the exchange on *Womenslink* suggested that the difficulty discussing political issues was not rooted in an actual fear of sanction from other members of the list but rather related to the restraint discussed earlier of perceiving emails to *Womenslink* as an official position from their organisation and also more generally to inhibitions experienced in daily lives. Although

Womenslink was a closed mailing list, it was perceived as a public forum, with the associated restraints to free expression. This finding suggests the limits for *Womenslink* as a vehicle for linking with mainstream politics in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, the interviews with staff of the *Womenslink* member organisations found that their work did not focus on mainstream politics or lobbying but rather on movement politics outside the mainstream; in this context, it is not altogether surprising that they did not use *Womenslink* extensively to link with mainstream politics.

It is also possible that mainstream political issues were rarely discussed on *Womenslink* because its members did not see the list as a forum for discussion of political issues. However it was clear that such discussions were "allowed" on the list; they were simply not pursued. Rather the potential "political" aspects of a given topic were shifted to more "personal" ground, which in many cases was linked to the community organising work of the women's movement. Consider, for example, the exchange below, in the aftermath of the bombing of the town of Omagh in Northern Ireland in 1998 by a dissident republican group in which 29 people died; it was the worst single act of violence in 30 years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. On *Womenslink*, the discussion of this event centred on the response of women and women's organisations.

"(...) It's hard to feel anything but disbelief, it's like you can't get your head round anything this monumentally awful (...) I have been thinking all w/end about [name of Womenslink member] and the others in Omagh and desperately hoping that they and their families are physically intact. [Name of another Womenslink member] from Omagh who now works [with us] had a very lucky escape having been in the town centre when the blast occurred. She is unhurt but VERY shaken and needless to say the family has lost friends in the explosion. No one in [building in Belfast centre] today looks like themselves, there is an air of wanting to wake up and be told it has all been a nightmare. [Name of women's centre] have been down to the City Hospital to offer blood as stocks are badly depleted from the W/end. How are all the rest of you coping out there on the link?" (message #130, August 17 1998).

"We don't have much to say here, except we're all very sad. It's hard to sit down and analyse the situation, and almost feels pointless. It has to be done, of course, so that maybe we can work out ways that it doesn't happen again? It's good that the women at [name of women's centre] went around to give blood, we are passing round the news in our building, so that our women follow their example" (message #131, August 17 1998).

Given the low use of *Womenslink* for linking with mainstream politics, the obvious follow-on question is whether *Womenslink* facilitated or promoted involvement in alternative politics — the women's movement and community organising activities. The research was not conclusive on this point. The interviews with staff of *Womenslink* member organisations found that they were involved in a wide variety of networking and organising activities with women and other women's organisations, and that the Internet played no part or a very small part in these activities. Most of the *Womenslink* member organisations had extensive links with grassroots women's groups that did not use computers or the Internet; their primary networking and communication vehicle was a regular newsletter and postal

mailouts. Email use between *Womenslink* member organisations and other women's organisations represented only a small part of their overall networking activities. For example, one organisation coordinator used email to link with other women's organisations working on an international and a cross-border project, but she preferred face-to-face communications with more local contacts.

On the other hand, the content analysis of *Womenslink* found that the mailing list was used extensively to exchange information on the women's movement and organising around women's issues. It was difficult to say whether this production was merely a faint reflection of the larger organising and networking activities of the *Womenslink* member organisations, or rather represented a new and significant addition to these activities, given that *Womenslink* played such a small part in their overall networking and organising activities. In total, 19 percent of *Womenslink* content overall contained information or commentary on women's movement and organising activities. Most involved information about events and issues in the women's movement in Northern Ireland, including, for example, conferences on the women's movement, public meetings and events, job postings in the women's sector, information and support for protests and actions, women's policy issues, arts and cultural events, and so on.

Linking Local and Transnational or Global

The third element of the analytical framework is the ability of the alternative media form or process on the Internet to link local with transnational or global actors and concerns. The interviews with staff of *Womenslink* member organisations found that many staff members were using email to keep in touch with friends or contacts abroad, and for some this was their primary use of the Internet. However with one exception, the organisations were not using the Internet to make connections with other women's organisations outside Ireland and the United Kingdom because their sphere of operations was local or regional rather than transnational or global; the exception was one organisation working on an international project that had acquired an Internet connection to facilitate this work.

The research highlighted the difficulty of linking local actors transnationally or globally using the Internet. The women's organisation working on the global project had subscribed to an Internet mailing list offering a news service about Israel but had been overwhelmed with messages and did not read them. A participant from another organisation described being subscribed without her knowledge to a mailing list linking women's organisations in rural Australia. She unsubscribed from the list after getting to the point of deleting all the messages without reading them, because "it's not directly in our line of interest," and she knew of other Northern Ireland women's organisations who had also been subscribed and unsubscribed for the same reason. These experiences point to the difficulty of linking local actors transnationally or globally, when the local contexts or codes are unfamiliar to the other.

On the *Womenslink* list itself, five percent of content overall was linked to wider transnational or global issues, including about two percent of content linking with issues in the United States and only one percent concerned with the European Union (primarily policies and funding programmes). One percent concerned International Women's Day activities in a local context. It is difficult to say whether these messages were significant in the context of supporting a wider women's

movement or promoting the formation of common identities among women or feminists on a global scale. Most of these messages were forwarded from another source, although in some cases the *Womenslink* member forwarding the message added her own commentary. At the *Womenslink* feedback session, with one exception, none of the participants believed that either *Womenslink* or the Internet made them feel part of a larger women's movement, although several thought it had the potential to do so. The exception was one staff member who used the Internet often and said that the Web, rather than *Womenslink*, made her feel part of a larger movement because she spent time looking at Web pages of women's organisations in the US and elsewhere. The findings point to a situation where the alternative media on the Internet reflected rather than extended the geographical sphere of activities of Irish women's organisations.

Links with Social Capital

Links with social capital is the fourth element of the analytical framework. The first issue is whether alternative media forms on the Internet helped to create, extend or strengthen networks of support. Again, the interviews with staff of *Womenslink* member organisations found that the Internet and the *Womenslink* mailing list played a small part in their overall support structures. At the *Womenslink* feedback session, there was no consensus that *Womenslink* helped to strengthen support networks although one participant believed it did and another thought it was useful for sustaining relationships.

A related issue is the extent to which *Womenslink* helped to build trust among the participants. At the feedback session, participants suggested that the word "trust" was not an appropriate description for the relationship among *Womenslink* members but rather that trust was something developed through face-to-face interaction, and that once established, it could possibly be maintained through Internet communications.

Another social capital concern is whether *Womenslink* helped to create and consolidate common identities and communities. The interviews with staff members of *Womenslink* organisations found that many used email to maintain relations of community and friendship with friends and work contacts, particularly those abroad. Maintaining friendship networks through email exchange was perhaps the most important function of the Internet in these organisations. The content analysis of *Womenslink* found that a high level of content — 17 percent of the content overall — was internal chat and administrative information, including news about staff members, "fun" messages, and various related messages such as poems, recipes, and jokes. The friendly nature of these and other messages on *Womenslink* highlighted the community-building function of *Womenslink*. However the *Womenslink* feedback session found that some *Womenslink* participants were put off by such messages and believed they contributed to a "clique-effect" on the list. It was suggested at the feedback session that the way to break the clique-effect was for *Womenslink* participants to meet more often face-to-face; this raised questions as to the extent to which the list could build common identities among participants without physical contact. On the other hand, the high number of messages relating to women's movement organising, discussed above, also suggested that *Womenslink* served at some level to reinforce identities as women's movement actors.

A final aspect of the social capital element is the extent to which *Womenslink* was able to build organisational capacity for its member women's organisations. There was one specific area where *Womenslink* did offer support to its members grounded in real organisational needs — help and information about information technology. The content analysis of *Womenslink* found that a very high percentage of messages — 26 percent of *Womenslink* content overall — contained information and commentary related to IT. This included information about computer troubleshooting and support, training opportunities, various activities supporting the development of IT skills for women, discussion and links to Web sites of interest to staff members, as well as circulation and discussion of hoax virus messages. One obvious reason for this level of content around IT was that the women who used *Womenslink* often had the highest level of IT skills in their respective organisations, and so it made sense that they would use *Womenslink* as a way of accessing this collective expertise.

The Participants

The fifth element of the analytical framework is the participants. The interviews with staff members found that most *Womenslink* organisations worked with smaller grassroots women's groups that were not using the Internet; in most cases these groups did not use computers. This low overall usage of the Internet in the women's sector in Ireland was a significant brake to more frequent use of the Internet by *Womenslink* member organisations.

The research identified barriers and restraints to Internet access and participation in the women's sector on two levels: the organisation, and within the organisation. On the level of organisation, significant barriers were: the cost of the technology combined with a low organisational income; the lack of sympathetic computer and Internet-related information and support, especially in rural areas; the lack of affordable training in rural areas; and a lack of organisational knowledge about training and computer system requirements. Within *Womenslink* member organisations, barriers and restraints to using the Internet included: concerns about costs of the technology, lack of time for training and to practice using the Internet; having only one Internet-linked computer in the organisation that was not easily accessed by staff; having to share the modem line and the voice telephone line; technical problems accessing the ISP; high staff turnover rates; and the difficulty of obtaining training or information about advanced computer needs, such as LAN networks within the organisation. The outcome was that among organisations and within organisations, there were significant differences regarding ability to use the Internet.

The research on *Womenslink* did not include gathering information to build socio-economic profiles of participants. It would have been useful to know if, for example, the women using the Internet in their organisations had higher levels of formal education than the non-users.

The Production Process

The sixth element of the analytical framework is the production process. The research found considerable differences among the media forms on the Internet regarding their levels of use and interactivity.

One-to-one email was by far the most common media form or process produced by *Womenslink* member organisations, with some making this a daily activity and others using it less frequently. Email use varied widely among the staff members, with some producing and receiving emails much more often than others. There was some fluidity between users and non-users of email; some staff members sent emails on behalf of others and printed out or called out incoming email messages for others. It was a common practice for staff members to use their organisation's email to communicate with friends, especially those in other countries, outside working hours; for some this was their primary use of email. During work hours, email was produced primarily for administrative uses, especially to reach people and organisations difficult to reach by phone. The research uncovered little about the production and use of email beyond basic patterns of use.

Although the Web was the second most common media form or process on the Internet used by *Womenslink* member organisations, they used it much less often than email. The women's organisations used the Web for viewing or consuming information rather than for publishing information. Among the *Womenslink* member organisations, only one had published a Web page by 1998; the staff member who produced and monitored it questioned whether it was of much value to the organisation. Of all the *Womenslink* staff members surveyed, only one reported that the Web was useful as an information source. The others found it time-consuming, confusing and even overwhelming, and the quality of information was not satisfactory for them.

The research found that mailing lists were the third most common alternative media form or process produced on the Internet by Irish women's organisations although aside from *Womenslink* they were hardly used. One finding about the production process of *Womenslink* was the fluidity between *Womenslink* messages and other media forms on the Internet, when for example *Womenslink* messages contained URLs to Web pages or attached files with multimedia content. Of the entire 500 *Womenslink* messages, 31 contained URLs to Web sites, or six percent of content overall. There were also five *Womenslink* messages with attached multimedia content, or one percent of content overall. However at the *Womenslink* feedback session, several participants said they did not know how to access these URLs and attachments.

Five hundred (email) messages were produced on *Womenslink* during the 124-week research period, with the number of messages produced increasing exponentially with the number of new participants. It took 41 weeks for the first 100 *Womenslink* messages to be produced, 30 weeks for the second 100 *Womenslink* messages, and so on; the final 100 messages were produced in just 12 weeks.

A significant finding about the *Womenslink* production process was that as the number of participants grew on *Womenslink*, and the numbers of messages increased, the participation rates dropped: from 100 percent participation (all members contributing messages during a given period) down to 56 percent, although participation rose again, to 76 percent near the end of the study period. In other words, even though the number of participants and messages increased, the percentage of *Womenslink* members producing messages decreased.

The qualitative research suggested that the production process became less participatory as the participants became less familiar with each other. However, it

was clear from the start of *Womenslink* that some participants were producing much more content than others. That pattern continued throughout the research period. The top three *Womenslink* member organisations produced about 50 percent of the *Womenslink* messages, and the top three individuals produced 50 percent or more of the content. At the end of the research period, the Belfast-based organisations produced more than the organisations in more rural areas outside Belfast, and the organisation coordinators produced more than the administrative workers. These findings raised the question about the extent to which *Womenslink* was "alternative" in the sense of supporting more democratic and participatory production processes than those in mainstream media forms.

It was significant that at the feedback session the general feeling was that *Womenslink* participation rates were low. In particular, some participants believed that others were not contributing enough information to *Womenslink*, thereby lowering the value of *Womenslink* for everyone. *Womenslink* participants spoke of a *Womenslink* "clique" producing messages and the need to break that image. The feedback session included development of groundrules for *Womenslink* that included responsibilities of participants to send information to the list; however the research did not investigate the extent to which the *Womenslink* groundrules were subsequently respected by the participants. It would have been useful to know, for example, if the *Womenslink* groundrules were able to raise the levels of trust among participants and the social capital value of the list or whether the groundrules were simply ignored.

One area for investigation related to the production process that was not explored by the current research is the ownership of the production technology. In the case of *Womenslink*, the owner of the *Womenslink* server was Dublin City University during the research period and a commercial server, Egroups.com, afterwards. It would have been useful to examine the implications of this ownership and the influence of the owner(s) on the *Womenslink* production process.

The Content

The seventh and final element of the analytical framework is the media content, with the main issue being the links between content and the experiences of the participants. The first aspect was the extent to which the *Womenslink* content reflected the lived experiences of its audience. The content analysis measured this partly by the number of "chat, administrative and internal" messages circulating on *Womenslink*; although *Womenslink* did contain a significant number of these messages, they steadily decreased over time. As well, the number of messages referring to the personal experiences of *Womenslink* participants decreased over time, with none produced in final period of the research. This finding suggested a further link between the increase in the number of *Womenslink* participants and the decrease of content reflecting lived experiences, similar to the link between the rise in the number of participants and the drop in participation levels. Again, this raises the question about the extent to which mailing lists like *Womenslink* can function as "alternative" media forms as the number of participants grows. Similarly, regarding the extent to which *Womenslink* content challenged dominant codes and tested new ideas, the content analysis also found that this type of content became less frequent over time, as the number of *Womenslink* participants grew.

A final question about content is whether the *Womenslink* audience had the possibility to correct *Womenslink*. Clearly this was a strong aspect of *Womenslink*; a high percentage of the content was mostly about *Womenslink* itself, some of which involved members' reflection about *Womenslink* as a media form and taking an active role in shaping *Womenslink*. However the analysis also highlighted the difficulty of making group decisions about changes to *Womenslink*; at several points in the study period, participants sent messages asking for feedback on suggested changes to *Womenslink* that did not draw any response.

Conclusions

When discussing alternative media on the Internet it is important to acknowledge that significant restraints and barriers to participation exist — by individuals, by organisations and within organisations, and on a regional, national and global scale — that have made Internet use a marginal activity in many areas and sectors of society. However Internet use by social movements and grassroots groups is increasing significantly and their alternative media activities on the Internet warrant a more central place in research on the transnational public sphere.

This area of empirical research is still at its earliest, exploratory, stage, and it should be expected that using the analytical framework developed in this article will lead to findings that will be different among the various contexts of social movement, grassroots organisation and alternative media forms on the Internet. The framework is intended to help develop a full range of the structural, social, political, and cultural factors involved and to resist simple and superficial interpretations.

The current research found that the link between *Womenslink* and the mainstream media and public sphere was weak; rather, *Womenslink* member organisations used the mailing list for women's movement politics and organising outside the mainstream. Clearly, *Womenslink* was not used for the type of social movement organising evident at the public demonstrations against capitalism in Seattle, Prague and Davos mentioned at the start of this article that were clearly aiming for huge media and political impact. In this sense, the research findings corroborated Manuel Castells' (1997) insistence on the difference between social movements and their political aims, and his analysis could be furthered by suggesting that the differing political aims of social movements will be reflected in the kinds of Internet media they produce and their relations with the public sphere.

The ideal public sphere is a space where participants freely exchange ideas. Using this measure, *Womenslink* did not fare well as a public sphere. *Womenslink* participants were constrained by their institutional affiliation. The participants believed their email messages to *Womenslink* were seen as official statements from their organisations, and this inhibited a more discursive and open forum. The perceived culture of silence on political issues in the North was a significant factor restraining political discussion on *Womenslink*, with staff of *Womenslink* member organisations agreeing that it was difficult if not impossible to discuss these issues on *Womenslink* or indeed in any public arena. This raises the question about the extent to which alternative media on the Internet will be able to operate effectively in places where armed conflict is taking place or where political or social repression is a daily reality.

The *Womenslink* experience highlights the challenge of extending alternative media on the Internet to participants unknown to each other. The discussion of topical issues decreased on *Womenslink* as the membership of the list grew, with the information exchanged becoming more impersonal and less discursive. Staff of *Womenslink* member organisations said they enjoyed the *Womenslink* discussions but acknowledged the difficulty of expressing an opinion without knowing the other members and not knowing how their opinion would be perceived. None believed that *Womenslink* made them feel part of a wider, global women's movement, despite the presence of some content with global links circulating on the mailing list. This raises the obvious question of whether "small" media on the Internet will ever become large enough to work in a transnational European or a global context.

The research raised the question of whether different social, political and cultural contexts or codes existing in different countries restrained the potential of developing links between *Womenslink* and the wider transnational or global arena. Again, the *Womenslink* experience can be contrasted with the global linking of activists for demonstrations in London, Seattle, Prague and Davos. One interpretation could be that the anti-capitalist discourse in these demonstrations was a common code or common political culture shared by the social movement groups and organisations involved; on the other hand, the different contexts and codes of gender relations and feminist activism in every country made such links difficult for *Womenslink*. In the context of a transnational European culture, perhaps increased prominence of European funding opportunities for women's organisations and increased prominence of equality policies at European level will stimulate increased use of the Internet across transnational boundaries by women's movement actors.

Womenslink was successful for the most part in reflecting the lived experiences of the women and women's organisations participating in the production, using alternative codes and challenging dominant codes, creating and testing out new ideas, and organising an audience capable of criticising and correcting the media. In alternative media theory (Sholle 1995), these aspects are important because they could signify an alternative to the mainstream media's commodification of audiences. However, there were tensions and contradictions in this alternative process. Content reflecting lived experiences, and creating and testing out new ideas, declined on *Womenslink* as the number of participants increased. It remains an open question whether collaborative media forms on the Internet can remain "alternative" media for a large number of participants. It is also difficult to see how rules of order and group decisions to modify these media forms will be respected and enforced.

Regarding the links between alternative media on the Internet and social capital, the empirical research found that *Womenslink* was useful as an IT resource, a place where staff on the mailing list could share concerns, common problems and information about computers and the Internet as well as share IT resources. Email was an important social capital resource for many staff in *Womenslink* member organisations who used it to maintain links of friendship and solidarity links with contacts abroad. However women's organisations were not using the Internet to extend their local social capital networks because face-to-face communications were much preferred when possible.

The Internet clearly offers different options to social movement actors for structuring relations of media production and consumption. Social movement organisations and grassroots groups can produce: email to communicate privately, out of the public eye; closed mailing lists to create a sense of solidarity and community; and Web pages to produce the "official" face of the organisation or movement to the wider public. The research found that when producing these alternative media forms on the Internet, some participants were much more dominant in the production process than others, and their participation was shaped by social and structural relations.

Using the terminology discussed in the theoretical overview to make some conclusions about the public sphere and the Internet, it could be argued that *Womenslink* resembled what John Keane (1995) called a micro-public sphere, where symbolic meanings were defined and redefined; what Nancy Fraser (1992) termed a subaltern public, a space of withdrawal and regroupment; and also what Alberto Melucci (1996) visualised as an independent public space where social movements could articulate and later publicise to the rest of society the themes they considered important. To some extent *Womenslink* also resembled what Castells (1997) termed a "cultural commune," a defensive community of retreat from the outside world. However, the division between public and private Internet spheres, or open and closed Internet communities, is not always clear. *Womenslink*, a closed mailing list, was seen as a public forum by the staff members using it, and was governed by the same rules of public interaction as in the physical world.

Note:

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