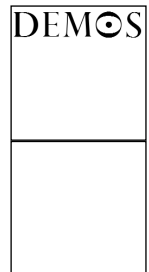


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**The rise of network
campaigning**

Paul Miller



16. The rise of network campaigning

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16 May 1998 was the day the network came alive. By coach, car, train, boat, bike and foot, 70,000 people converged on Birmingham where the G8 leaders, the most powerful men on the planet, were meeting in a steel, glass and concrete building especially fortified for the occasion by hundreds of CIA officers. At 3pm, the campaigners formed a human chain some 10km long, encircling the security-cordoned conference centre. But the men and women who had criss-crossed the UK to join hands weren't there to protest about a high-profile issue, decision or event in the news. Instead they wanted to make their feelings known about a complicated and, at the time, obscure matter of economic policy. They were supporters of the Jubilee 2000 campaign to cancel the unpayable debts of the world's poorest nations.

Social movements have always had an important effect on our political systems but in an increasingly connected society a new breed – the network campaign – has emerged. On issues from the environment and human rights to poverty eradication and debt reduction, network campaigns have taken on some of the biggest and most powerful institutions on the planet: from governments and multinational companies to the World Trade Organisation and the World Bank. Connecting non-governmental organisations, faith groups and trade unions as well as individual campaigners, networks have emerged that combine the resources, powers, skills and

experience of diverse institutions in new and potent combinations. While there has been no network theorist behind their strategies, campaigners have learned that networks offer a number of advantages over other institutional models. Over time, they have become their weapon of choice.

This essay argues that politics has much to understand and learn about network campaigning. It begins by examining the structure of the network campaigns, then goes on to look at the reasons for the use of networks by campaigners over other organisational forms before looking at some of the downsides network campaigning presents. It draws on examples from the Jubilee 2000 campaign, perhaps the first fully fledged network campaign to reach public consciousness.¹

The characteristics of network campaigns

First we need to consider what makes a campaign a ‘network campaign’. Simple definitions are difficult since it is partly the looseness of institutional structure and the diversity of tactics that make network campaigns different to traditional approaches. In essence, network campaigning allows a diverse grouping of organisations and individuals to participate through commitment to a shared purpose, while remaining autonomous individual agents. In this way it is possible to gain additional leverage over decision-making bodies through the ‘multiplier effect’ of a coherent message and more efficient deployment of resources and effort, while maintaining the flexibility and energy that more bureaucratic forms of coordination tend to squander. The characteristics and common features of network campaigns include the following features.

Having a shared goal

The main characteristic of campaigning networks is that they have a goal shared by those who are part of the network. As David Ronfeldt says, ‘The network form offers its best advantages where the members, as often occurs in civil society, aim to preserve their autonomy and to avoid hierarchical controls, yet have agendas that

are interdependent and benefit from consultation and coordination.² The meaning and goal of network campaigns is usually so simple to express and communicate that they are often seen as ‘single issue’ campaigns. For Jubilee 2000, the shared goal was ‘a debt-free start for a billion people’.

Being structure light

Network campaigns tend to be very light on traditional structure with only a small secretariat or coordinating body compared to the size of the network or the resources that it is able to mobilise. The role of the secretariat becomes that of network nurturer. Secretariats must spend their time creating connections between other people, and channelling the energy and enthusiasm that is created in the network towards increasing the cumulative impact on decision-makers. The central secretariat can also help the network to interpret the overall environment for the campaign by providing research and communicating feedback from political targets. Often networks have some form of democratic involvement from members, again coordinated by the secretariat. This can take the form of a management board, with some positions elected by network members and others filled by the founders of the campaign.

Mobilising a coalition of skills and resources

Each of the most prominent examples of networked campaigning over the last decade has drawn on established organisations and linked them together in a coalition of the wilful. Coalition members provide resources to fund the secretariat and access to their memberships and communication channels. However, individuals don’t have to be part of one of the coalition organisations to be part of the campaign. There are always easy ways to get involved, from simply signing a petition to show your support, through attending demonstrations, to letting it take over your life as a full-time member of staff or volunteer. The network will also include people with a variety of different skills that can be drawn upon at short notice.

Use of network technology

The internet has been vital to network campaigners and novel uses of the web, email or newsgroups are a common thread through several of the network campaigns of the late 1990s. Technology also plays a key role in recording events and important moments for the campaign. Since it is likely that the central secretariat won't be well enough resourced to be at every local demonstration or meeting, small groups of activists can use technology to swap pictures, video or recordings of events to give a rich picture of the level of activity within the network. The Jubilee 2000 website provided between 8,000 and 12,000 people with up-to-date information about the campaign every week. A webchat with Bono run by Jubilee 2000 in conjunction with MSN received hundreds of thousands of hits.

Embracing diversity and openness

An approach used by network campaigners is to communicate using a variety of different media, each allowing them to connect to new constituencies. So network campaigns don't just rely on, say, producing a magazine or holding a public meeting: they have a variety of ways of communicating to match the variety of potential participants. While it would be very unusual for organisations with completely opposite goals to the rest of the network to be allowed to join, it is not necessary for network members to agree on everything. Network members need to be compatible in their views, not identical. Jubilee 2000 brought together organisations as diverse as Friends of the Earth and the Mother's Union.

Use of celebrity

The power of TV can reach the parts that social networks cannot. In an era of broadcast media concentration and satellite news channels that reach across the world, campaigners have needed a way of accessing and harnessing these networks. The solution they have identified has been to use something that is common currency in these networks – a bit of stardust. When the organisers of the Brit awards decided to promote the Jubilee 2000 campaign after both

Muhammad Ali and Bono said they would attend, their message promoting the campaign reached a global TV audience of over 100 million people as well as widespread coverage in the press.

Use of physical space

The tactic of network campaigners has often been to foster a large and diverse network and then bring as many members of the networks as possible together in one place. The vibrant atmosphere on these occasions does not just look impressive for the TV cameras; it has also given campaigns an additional injection of energy. It has given people the motivation to go away and create new network connections. Jubilee 2000 took the human chain as its symbol of choice when bringing people together.

Personalisation of targets

While campaigners might want to include as many people as possible in their network, they see the value of focusing their efforts on one or two individuals who will feel the full weight of the network's efforts. In the UK, it was Tony Blair and Gordon Brown who took the flak from the Jubilee 2000 campaign. The mail rooms at Number 10 Downing Street and the Treasury discovered first-hand how large the Jubilee 2000 network had become when postcards from the network began to arrive in their tens of thousands.

Being time limited

A sense of urgency is the network campaigners' best friend. Jubilee 2000 took the end of the millennium as a deadline for world leaders to make a decision, taking their inspiration from the biblical idea of jubilee, the time when debts would be forgiven and slaves freed every 50 years. While social links created through one particular network campaign might live on to be used another day, individual network campaigns disappear as quickly as they are created.

Network campaigning 'attractors'

Why has the network become the organisational form of choice for

campaigners? One way of understanding this is to look at the advantages that this mode of organisation offers.

It's cheaper

Setting up new institutions is expensive. If you have a cause to fight, the requirements to build an organisational infrastructure able to communicate with millions of people are huge. Network campaigns make up for their shortfall in terms of financial muscle by tapping into the existing infrastructure that large NGOs or civil society organisations already possess. Using these latent networks and institutional resources as much as possible helps to keep costs to a minimum. If they do have a central secretariat at all, network campaigns do not have a large number of paid staff (Jubilee 2000 had at most 25 paid staff and for much of its lifetime even fewer).

It's quicker

A campaign can be built up very quickly through a network when it could have taken decades by other means. This is partly because campaigners don't need to raise as much money, but also because the agreement of a large number of people is not required before doing anything – decision-making structures are usually very light. And once a network has reached a critical mass, the campaign can move very quickly indeed. Like an epidemic, the message spreads (sometimes uncontrollably) through social networks, new connections reinforcing old connections. It took just four years for Jubilee 2000 to grow from being a UK-based organisation with a single employee working out of a shed on London's South Bank to an international force to be reckoned with, with 69 national campaigns and 24 million signatures on its petition.

It provides eyes everywhere

Network campaigns provide an army of researchers sending each other bits of information all the time. In particular, the internet has revolutionised links between campaigners across the globe. On 13 April 2000, 63 campaigners were arrested in Kenya during a debt

march. News of their arrest was circulated via the internet, prompting letters of protest from around the world. On 22 May of the same year the charges were dropped. Andre Hotchkiss, one of the arrested marchers said: 'Without the avalanche of email, fax, and letters that poured into Kenya, this thing may have pushed on for a longer time.'

It's more fun

Networks mean meeting new people and developing new friendships, often with people who you would never have come into contact with otherwise. Network campaigners make sure that there are plenty of chances to communicate and meet with others who share their goal. Physical gathering points are usually best, be they church meetings, student activist groups or informal groups meeting in people's homes. The traditional image of campaigns – delivering leaflets on a soggy winter's day, or hanging around at aggressive picket lines – has given way to a more colourful, eye-catching carnival atmosphere where a sense of humour is always present.

Ultimately, it's more effective

Described by Anthony Gaeta, a spokesman for the World Bank, as 'one of the most effective global lobbying campaigns I have ever seen', Jubilee 2000 surprised many of the institutions in the firing line with the sheer energy and enthusiasm they were able to generate.³ The network not only enabled Jubilee 2000 to bring together 70,000 people for one moment in 1998 or to gather 24 million petition signatures but also put the issue of debt high up on the agenda of subsequent international meetings and resulted in over \$36 billion of debts being cancelled. The fact that many of the organisations involved in Jubilee 2000 in the UK are now part of the Trade Justice Movement, a network campaign using many of the tactics of Jubilee 2000 to campaign for fairer trade rules between developed and developing nations, perhaps also shows that they themselves see the advantages of network campaigning for getting results.

The challenges of networks

But networks do have downsides. Accountability, for example, is often messy in networks, not easily corresponding to conventional ideas of due process or democracy. The qualification for inclusion in a network is enthusiasm and a willingness to work with others, but this can develop to a point where the people who are the most enthusiastic and most connected – the hubs – can dominate. These are people who move between established groups, passing on information, encouraging collaboration and fixing meetings. They could be housewives or headmasters, accountants or Baptist ministers and they are vital to the success of network campaigns. But since they are often neither employed nor elected by the campaign they can be very difficult to hold to account. While most network campaigns have some democratic functions built into their very light structures, they can be dogged by allegations that particular personalities are allowed to dominate. Within international networks problems of ‘strength of voice’ can cause tensions, particularly between campaigners in the South and those in the North. In extreme circumstances, this can lead to a second challenge in campaigning networks – forking. This is a problem also seen in ‘open source’ software programming, where disagreement over the overall goal or aim of the network leads to it splitting into two or more parts.

Another challenge is that once networks have grown they become harder to maintain. Success can be expensive. As networks become more effective and their activity more visible, traditional political actors such as governments, corporate institutions or the media look for a central point to ask questions and, if they are seeking to quash the network, to focus their firepower. This leads to what some campaigners call ‘death by consultation’, where the secretariat at the centre is distracted from its central goal of nurturing the network by the need to invest more and more time, people and resources in servicing requests from the outside world. Just at the moment that success in terms of profile has been achieved (a prerequisite for large-scale networks) secretariats can grow very rapidly and demands for the secretariat to become run like a ‘normal’ organisation grow.

Network campaigns can also burn out before their goals are achieved. Members of the network need to have something they can individually achieve in order to see the value in their activity. But if people see change happening quickly, and their cause getting widespread coverage in the media, they think they've done enough. For this reason network campaigns tend to have a high-water mark – a point where they are at the peak of their influence, when they can do most. After that they can find it hard to survive.

Finally and, looking to the future, perhaps most importantly, is the question of whether network campaigns can become a constructive force for change in their own right, or whether they will remain essentially parasitic on existing institutional structures, policy tools and power bases. Can they learn to deliver solutions to problems, rather than just hoping that by shouting loud enough and long enough they will get solved by someone else? Networks seem to be very good at undermining more traditional organisational forms but, so far, surprisingly few have made the transition to constructing new positive institutions. The criticism levelled at campaigners by governments or multilateral institutions is 'could they do any better?' The World Social Forum is an attempt by a huge swathe of civil society groups to do just this. If successful, it could prove to be a massive step forward for network-based civil society solutions.

The future of network campaigning

So what does the future hold for network campaigning? What will be the longer-term effects of repeated use of network campaigning? Will it influence levels of activity in civil society more broadly, for instance, increasing (or decreasing) membership of more traditional, vertically organised civil society institutions like the large NGOs? If people see the network campaigns as more effective than the institutions they are based upon, will they continue to support those institutions? And are network campaigns getting more effective over time as they learn from previous campaigns? These are all questions to be researched and understood.

But the most important area of development will be in the political

domain. Increasing use of network campaigning could pose a significant threat to national governments. We have already seen the potential political power of network campaigns in developing countries.⁴ In 2003 the UK Stop The War Coalition brought more than a million people on to the streets of London. If network campaigns continue to grow in terms of their numerical power and the sophistication of campaigning techniques, it could only be a matter of time before a major Western government is brought down by a network campaign. Networks have provided civil society organisations with a way of handling organisational and logistical complexity that governments have yet to embrace.

Political parties themselves will need to learn from the network campaigners. As Manuel Castells has written: 'Mass political parties, when and where they still exist, are empty shells, barely activated as electoral machines at regular intervals.'⁵ The rapid shrinkage in the membership of political parties in the UK should be cause for concern, and the simultaneous growth in the prominence of network campaigns offers some lessons for their future. Howard Dean's campaign for the Democratic nomination for the US presidency is the most prominent example to date of putting the techniques of network campaigning to effect. Certainly the Dean network showed many of the characteristics outlined above, and its influence both on the tone and the issues that have defined the present contest, and on the evolution of future campaign strategies, should not be underestimated. That Dean's networks were enough to catapult him from obscurity to front-runner but not, ultimately, to deliver the final prize perhaps also points to the next challenge for network politics: navigating the delicate point where the new grassroots networks come face to face with the old hierarchies of power, influence and communication.

So the final question for the future is: what would happen if a network campaign did successfully propel a government into office? And when it got there, what would it mean for current models of governance? For now, these remain 'what if' questions. Yet the need to shift power and decision-making away from the centre, and the

broader task of renewing the legitimacy of parties, government and politics itself, are now an established part of the contemporary debate. As UK Cabinet Office Minister, Douglas Alexander MP has argued: 'Our challenge now is to build on the foundations of the distributive democracy we have begun to fashion.'⁶ The campaigns, like Jubilee 2000, that have used networks so effectively in recent years might just hold the key.

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Notes

- 1 The UK Jubilee 2000 Coalition closed its doors in December 2000. It has been succeeded in the UK by the Jubilee Debt Campaign and Jubilee Research, both of which continue to advocate the cancellation of unpayable debts of poor countries. Examples in this essay are with thanks to Nick Buxton, formerly of the UK Jubilee 2000 Coalition, and Jess Worth of People and Planet.
- 2 D Ronfeldt, *Tribes, Institutions, Markets, Networks: a framework about societal evolution* (California: Rand Institute, 1996).
- 3 Quoted in *PR Week*, 16 April 1999.
- 4 For more information, see H Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: the next social revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2002).
- 5 M Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: reflections on the internet, business and society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 6 In foreword to D Rushkoff, *Open Source Democracy: how online communication is changing offline politics* (London: Demos, 2003).