

Organizing a social movement organization by means of the Internet: Deliberation or staging?

Bolette M. Christensen

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This paper is the follower of the MODINET working paper no. 1: “Constructing a Social Movement. The Case of ATTAC: A Case of Constructive Journalism” (2002). Both papers present preliminary analyses of the way a new social movement organization, ATTAC in Denmark, was constructed by use of the media, i.e. by medialization of the organizing process. The studies are part of a broader research project on the role different communicative media play in the organization, mobilization, information sharing and political practices of social movements, in particular in the field of anti-corporate, globally oriented movements (see project description, www.modinet.dk, Research Projects). The main and overall focus is the interplay of communicating in “virtual space” and organization and political practice in the space of places.

In working paper no. 1 the story was told of how the newspaper Information constructed and initiated the organisation ATTAC in Denmark.

They did so by

- (a) Constructing the organisation as *the* new kind of globally oriented movement that would attract and unite, lead and coordinate, thousands of young people, who were supposed to have a global consciousness, and who were not former politically organized, that is, a new politically “innocent” group, neither “left” nor “right”. This construction was primarily realized in articles, editorials and debates in the news paper, spreading intertextually from there to other news papers and mass media.
- (b) Establishing a web forum for people interested in building ATTAC. The idea was among others that of *the virtual organization* which would be based solely (or at least primarily) on communication on the web.
- (c) Arranging and summoning a public meeting where ATTAC was actually started. Local groups were organized. Initiatives were organized. Mailing lists were established. Allegedly more than 1000 people attended the meeting.

The virtual organization

As mentioned above, one of the main ideas of the constructors, that is the journalists who created the story of ATTAC, was the idea of *the virtual organization*. This was an idea of an organization that would have its place in cyberspace, i.e. in the web. It should not be dependent on meetings, on an office, on general assemblies and the like. Communication and debate should flow primarily through the internet. Initiating and organizing activities would and should be via electronic communication. Debates should find their place at the net. Organization should accordingly be non hierarchical and network based.

So the web debate which was initiated by Information at the newspaper's site, was essential in the construction of ATTAC as a new form of organization – and a new form of social movement.

The contributions to the debate could be sent by mail, so the debate functioned as a mailing list as well. And the web debate delivered material for the newspaper to print, so helping in the production of at least an “element” in the news paper per day, which was the proclaimed intention during the paper's campaign for ATTAC.

The web site seemingly launched a lively debate. However, according to the moderating journalist, not always with the content that the constructors had had in mind. The young and the innocent did not dominate the web debate. Among others, an organization called Counter-ATTAC was started and interfered with the debate. The debaters from this organization are strong and convinced neo-liberals, proponents of economic globalization in all its manifestations. The entrance of Counter-ATTAC was much to the annoyance of Information, as the central division was established between neo-liberals and ATTAC, thereby rather reinforcing than transcending the left-wing divide which Information had proclaimed irrelevant.

But this may be just one of the shortcomings of the very idea held by the constructors. How did the shortcomings show in the web debate itself? Who did actually participate? What was the web debate actually used for? Which kind of debates took place there? What are the differences between this kind of debate and traditional “letters to the editor”? Which new “genre” – or rather mix of genres – are realized in this kind of communication?

The overall question is: What are the relations between this organizing and communicating in “virtual space” (or: in the pace of flows) and in the space of places, using an expression from Castells (1997). Does a web debate of this kind serve as a mediator of organizing collective action in the space of places?

The web debate initiated by the newspaper was started in January 2001. The public meeting was held at the end of February 2001. ATTAC was formally started as a nationwide organization in October 2001, although there had been a national conference already in the summer.

At the end of the summer of 2001, ATTAC was no more the great darling of Information, as shown in working paper no. 1. And, at that time the different groups of ATTAC had begun using another medium of electronic communication, a service “umbrella” for different groups, called Groupcare.dk. Here you could sign up for different web debates, and have the contributions sent by e-mail, that is sign up for mailing lists. The ATTAC forum was open to all, still you had to use a password by your own choice.

Finally, ATTAC got its own web site (www.ATTAC.dk) where debates and information in general are publicized. You can sign up for mailing lists for different groups where information

on organizational matters and activities are brought, but the web debate is found solely at the public web site, and all material sent by the mailing lists is publicly available at the web site as well ¹.

Around October 2001, when ATTAC Denmark was formally started, the web debate initiated by Information ebbed away.

To get a provisional answer as to how this debate actually functioned I have conducted a provisional investigation of the debate from February the 20th 2001 until it ebbed away. I got all the contributions sent by mail. So I do not have contributions from the month before the public meeting was held. The contributions cover the time from few days before this meeting (which was on the 22th of February) and until around October 2001.

The web forum initiated by Information

Some of the characteristics of the particular web forum on ATTAC, as organized by Information, is

- It is arranged by a newspaper and has as such some characteristics in common with the debates in the printed version of the paper: The debate may be seen as an extension to the genre of “readers’ debate”.
- All contributions are publicly available. There was no claim for a password.
- All contributions are signed by the contributor’s real name, as well as with an e-mail address
- In contrast with the debate in the printed paper, it is much less edited, although some editing has taken place
 - the contributions are placed according to subject. When the debate was at its highest the contributions were distributed among several topics
 - the possibilities of exclusion of a contribution are much less present. Although some moderation has taken place (a certain amount of civility was told to be a precondition for participating, and a journalist was appointed responsible moderator of the debate) any contribution would be publicised
 - this means that there is much more dialogue and interactivity possible than in ordinary readers’ debates
 - there is very little time lag between writing and publicizing

¹ATTAC in Denmark now has around 300 members which would be of the same magnitude as for example the newer and somewhat more radical group Global Roots which is politically connected to the Italian Disobbediente movement. While ATTAC is strongly institutionally oriented (with for example the Tobin tax as a main objective), Global Roots may be seen as more “anarchistic” although they adhere to only non violence tactics. Both organizations were actively participating in the activities around the EU summit in Copenhagen in December 2002 (along with a range of other groups and organizations) and have been so in the antiwar movement (along with a range of other organizations and groups, in Denmark coordinated by the initiative No War Against Iraque.

- Some contributions have been reproduced in the printed paper. That is, the kind of reflection required by the responsibility of having your views publicized, would be present here as well
- As it is in the form of a public debate, contributions would not only be contributions to a dialogue with your fellow debaters, but at the same time statements addressed to the public. There is an audience present. Rather than the Habermasian rational communication as a way of consensus seeking dialogue, it may as well be an accentuation and staging of one's own views in order to fight and invalidate other persons' views. So even if it was the intention to create a space for free dialogue and deliberation, an unbound and equal exchange of ideas and enthusiasm, the debate may instead present an arena for political opponents who direct an audience rather than each other.

Distribution of contributions

In table 1 is shown how contributions are distributed among the persons contributing to the web debate.

Contributions per person	No. of persons	No. of contributions	% persons	% contributions	No. of persons accumulated	% persons accumulated	No. contributions accumulated	% contributions accumulated
1	84	84	65,6	28,5	84	65,6	84	28,5
2	20	40	15,6	13,6	104	81,2	124	42,1
3	7	21	5,4	7,1	111	86,7	145	49,3
4	1	4	0,7	1,3	112	87,5	149	50,6
5	5	25	3,9	8,5	117	91,4	174	59,1
6	2	12	1,5	4,0	119	92,9	186	63,2
7	2	14	1,5	4,7	121	94,5	200	68,0
8	2	16	1,5	5,4	123	96,0	216	73,4
12	1	12	0,7	4,0	124	96,8	228	77,5
13	2	26	1,5	8,8	126	98,4	254	86,3
17	1	17	0,7	5,7	127	99,2	271	92,1
23	1	23	0,7	7,8	128	100,0	294	100,0
	128	294	100	100				

Table 1. Distribution of contributions

The diagram below, Figure 1, illustrates the inequality when it comes to contributing to the web debate. If contributions had been equally distributed among the participants, the distribution would have followed the dotted line. However, this is obviously not the case.

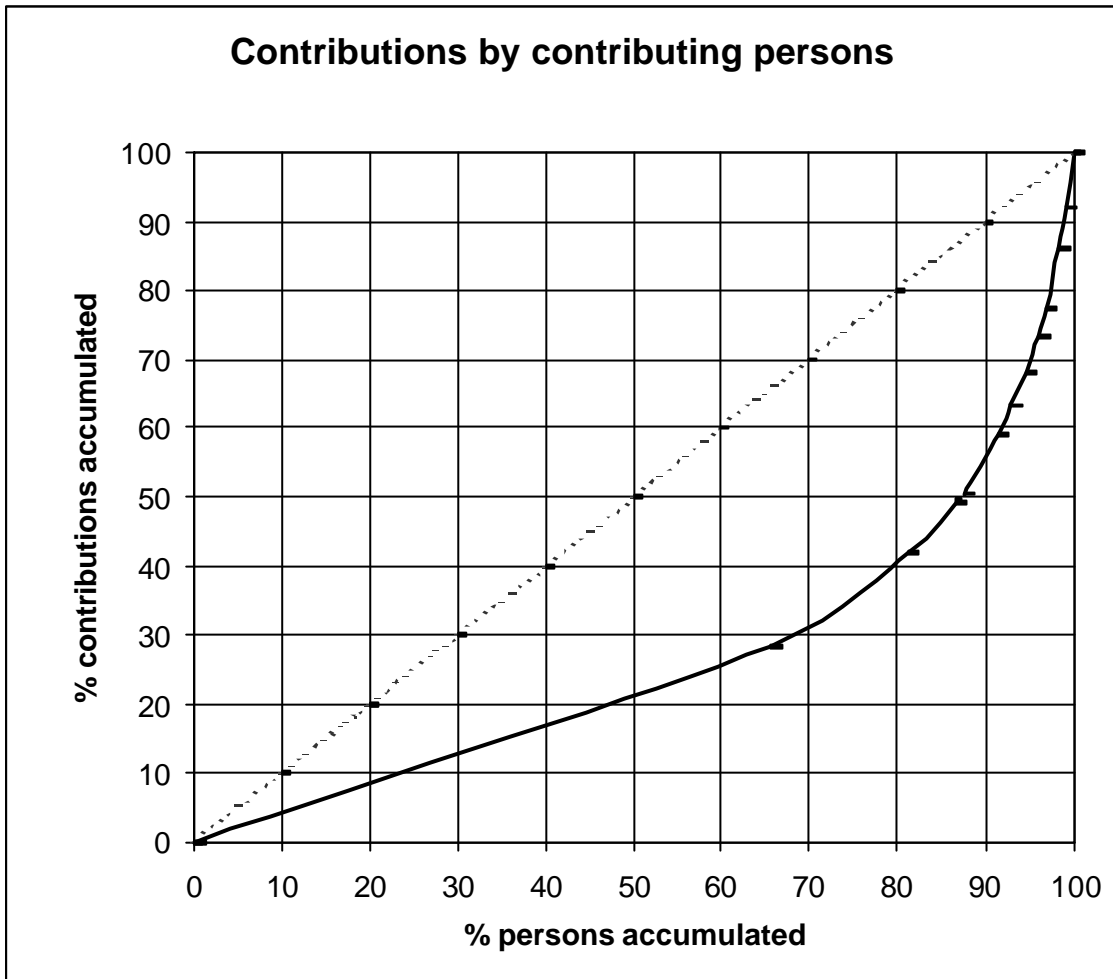


Figure 1. Contributions by contributing persons

Among the contributions 73 concern organizational matters, like summons for meetings and the like. If these contributions are subtracted, only those participating in ongoing debates are left. They amount to a number of 221 contributions, with a number of 85 discussants. The distribution of the contributions to ongoing debates is shown in table 2.

Here just 5 persons, appearing more than 10 times each, and amounting to a bit more than 5% of the population, are responsible for almost 35% of all contributions. And the most busy ones, producing 13, 17 and 23 contributions respectively during the period, have obviously not been concerned with organizational matters.

The diagram showing the inequality of the distribution when organizational matters are left out, is presented in figure 2.

Contributions per person	No. of persons	No. of contributions	% persons	% contributions	No. of persons accumulated	% persons accumulated	No. contributions accumulated	% contributions accumulated
1	52	52	61,1	23,5	52	61,1	52	23,5
2	14	28	16,4	12,6	66	77,6	80	36,1
3	6	18	7	8,1	72	84,7	98	44,3
4	1	4	1,1	1,8	73	85,8	102	46,1
5	3	15	3,5	6,7	76	89,4	117	52,9
6	2	12	2,3	5,4	78	91,7	129	58,3
8	2	16	2,3	7,2	80	94,1	145	65,6
11	1	11	1,1	4,9	81	95,2	156	70,5
12	1	12	1,1	5,4	82	96,4	168	76,0
13	1	13	1,1	5,8	83	97,6	181	81,9
17	1	17	1,1	7,6	84	98,8	198	89,5
23	1	23	1,1	10,4	85	100,0	221	100,0
	85	221	100	100,0				

Table 2. Distribution of contributions to ongoing debates

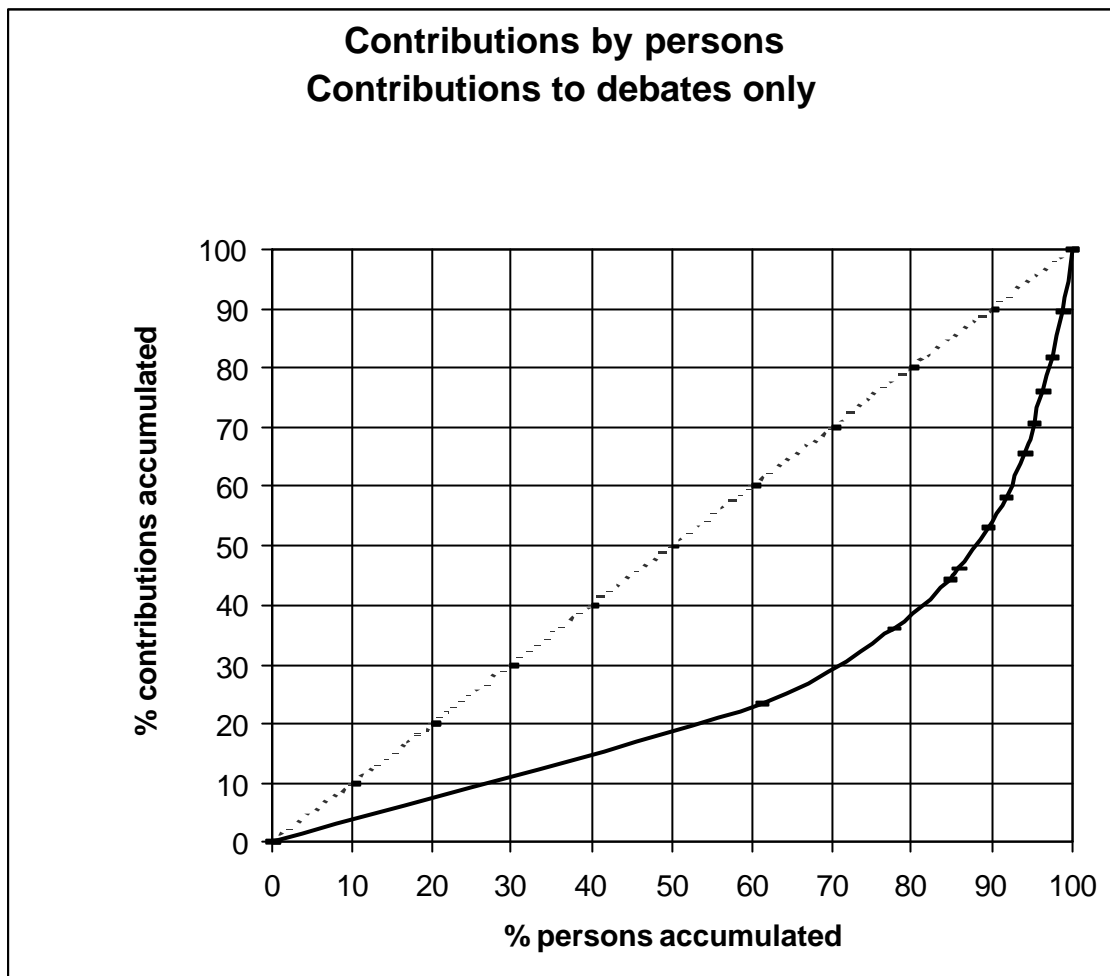


Figure 2. Contributions by persons for debates only

The distribution is slightly more unequal than when organizational contributions are included.

But then, what are these few busy discussants occupied with?

Seemingly they are busy discussing with opponents, rather than with those with whom they fundamentally agree. The debate between neoliberal opponents to ATTAC, the persons belonging to CounterATTAC, and those who are engaged in the building of ATTAC, count for 100 out of the 221 debating contributions. The distribution of these contributions is shown in table 3. Only contributions which are personally addressed, are included. Political statements which are not directly addressed to specific persons are left out. So, almost half of the political discussion going on in the web debate consists of personal fights between opponents who disagree in a fundamental way – and hardly believe in convincing each other or aim at reaching agreement. Some of the contributions may be highly intellectual (and very long), presenting arguments based on economic theory, like fights on who would be the most clever economist and would be drawing upon the correct economic knowledge, that is, the genre of academic discourse. But quite a few of the contributions are arrogant, sarcastic, ridiculing, aiming at the person rather than at the topic, i.e. more the genre of the pub row.

Contributions per person	No. of persons	No. of contributions	% persons	% contributions	No. of persons accumulated	% persons accumulated	No. contributions accumulated	% contributions accumulated
1	13	13	46,4	13,0	13	46,4	13	13,0
2	5	10	17,8	10,0	18	64,2	23	23,0
3	2	6	7,1	6,0	20	71,4	29	29,0
4	1	4	3,5	4,0	21	75,0	33	33,0
5	1	5	3,5	5,0	22	78,5	38	38,0
6	1	6	3,5	6,0	23	82,1	44	44,0
7	2	14	7,1	14,0	25	89,2	58	58,0
9	1	9	3,5	9,0	26	92,8	67	67,0
12	1	12	3,5	12,0	27	96,4	79	79,0
21	1	21	3,5	21,0	28	100,0	100	100,0
	28	100	100	100,0				

Table 3. Distribution of contributions to debates ATTAC vs Counter-ATTAC

So, seemingly the most busy participants are occupied with personal fights with opponents, rather than with constructive debates on what should be the politics of the new social movement organization.

And those who are the most hard working participants in the web debate as such, are persons who try to obstruct the building up of the new organization and fundamentally disagree with the political foundation of ATTAC. They are the neo-liberals connected to CounterATTAC.

This is seen in table 4. The table covers all contributions to the web debate, except those concerning organizational matters.

Attitude towards ATTAC	No of persons	No of contributions	No of contributions per person	% of all persons	% of all contributions
Neo-liberal opponent	4	50	12,5	4,7	22,6
Unspecified critic	18	27	1,5	21,1	12,2
Sympathizer	54	132	2,4	63,5	59,7
Unknown	9	12	1,3	10,5	5,4
In all	85	221	2,6	100	100,0

Table 4. Contributions to debates by attitude towards ATTAC

The 4 neo-liberal opponents, constituting less than 5% of the participants, are responsible for more than a fifth of all the contributions to the web debate in the period. On the average, each of them produced more than 12 contributions in the period. In all more than a third of the contributions came from discussants critical towards the idea of ATTAC. Compared to this, sympathizers with the upcoming organization on the average produced 2,4 contributions, which would be the average for the total number of contributors in the period.

By these efforts the neo-liberal discussants to a large degree succeeded in setting the agenda as well as the standards of the debate. By means of either ridicule or academic recognition they actively took part in shaping practices of exclusion and inclusion. Furthermore, they tied some of the most active supporters of ATTAC to engage in futile debates which they initiated. So the most busy activist of the upcoming ATTAC spent much energy on debates which did *not* aim at generating the common ground of the new organization. Instead of engaging in a deliberative mode of debate aiming at consensus around aims and means of the organization, they spent their energy on debates aiming not at convincing each other but on convincing an *audience*. So there was more stageing than deliberation and dialogue, more flattening and putting down than communicative rationality – even when retaining the form of academic discourse.

So much hope had been invested in the debate. It was to build the foundation of a brand new social movement, based on equal access to the free deliberation of aims, means, strategy and structure, realizing the democratic promises of the Internet. Which it did not fulfill. Some of the specific characteristics of the forum may have contributed to the lack of constructive deliberation. One of these would be the public character of the debate, as it was launched by a newspaper at this paper's public site and heavily promoted in the printed version of the paper. The genre of letters to the editor was prevailing over the genre of symmetric dialogue, the implicit presence of an audience more important than the need of mutual deliberation.

When ATTAC established its own web forum at Groupcare.dk the neo-liberal opponents to ATTAC lost all interest in participation. The debate, more or less hidden away, was no longer occupying important public space, and, following the decrease in interest shown by the mass media, presented no longer a strategically relevant arena to the opponents.

Further, ATTAC did not organize solely by means of the web. Substantial debates and decisions were taken at local meetings, group meetings and general assemblies. And political action was taken, not in cyberspace but in the space of places. Further, ATTAC actually has a manned office where you can contact the organization.

Following these experiences, a couple of hypotheses could be stated:

- The democratic potential in the web based media connected to the opportunities for dialogical communication, may not primarily be found in the creation of a new kind of deliberative public. Rather, the strength of the web based media would be found in their *organizational* capabilities, offering tools for organization of groups, networks and partial publics, based upon common interests, generating contexts for collective action, and thereby making it possible to enter into the domain of public and political recognition.
- The web based media are not just one medium. There are specificities connected to different types, different genres and mixtures of genres, and, not least, different ways of using these media. So it is necessary to study the diversity and variety in the use of web based media in order to assess their potential in generating new types of political publics.
- Further, the web based media do not render superfluous all other types of communicative media in the organization of political publics and networks. The idea of a solely “virtual organization” probably builds upon a fundamental lack of understanding the terms of opponent political organizations as such. Rather, what may be seen in these years, are new *combinations* of communicative media used in, and generating, different contexts for political action. So in order to study the role of media use in political organizing, it is necessary to explore the specific compositions of media used in the organizing of the diversity of networks of resistance and alternative, from the local to the global scale.

References

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