Social movements and email: expressions of online identity in the globalization protests
Melissa A. Wall
New Media Society 2007; 9; 258
DOI: 10.1177/1461444807075007

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/9/2/258

Additional services and information for New Media & Society can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://nms.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations (this article cites 7 articles hosted on the SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):
http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/9/2/258
Social movements and email: expressions of online identity in the globalization protests

MELISSA A. WALL
California State University – Northridge, USA

Abstract
This study focuses on three email lists – one used by a professional organization (Friends of the Earth) and two by grassroots, street-level participants (Direct Action Network and People’s Global Action) – in the Seattle World Trade Organization protests. Each list was examined in terms of how it contributed to the expression of collective identities online. Each group’s list employed at least one of three processes identified here as key to collective identity: the Friends of the Earth list emphasized cognitive framing of the event; Direct Action Network focused on emotional investments among list members; and People’s Global Action stressed setting boundaries among movement participants. Yet overall, none of the lists was entirely successful as a vehicle for expressing movement identities, suggesting that while the internet may facilitate certain organizational activities of social movements, it appears to have less impact on their symbolic ones.

Key words
collective identity • email • globalization • internet • social movement • WTO
Just as a small group of dominant rich countries, multinational corporations and multilateral institutions has coalesced into a global empire over the last two decades, a global movement against unfettered global capitalism has formed as well (Hardt and Negri, 2004; Mertes, 2004; Yuen, 2004). Sometimes called a ‘movement of movements’, this global activism against neo-liberal economics has contributed to a ‘generational shift’ in how governments, corporations and citizen groups interact, bringing renewed emphasis to research that tries to understand the ways in which social movements have created new organizational forms and new types of communication (Hayduk, 2002; John and Thomson, 2003; Mertes, 2004). This article focuses on a key moment for this global movement: the Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in 1999.

From September 11 to the Anglo-American terrorism wars, much has happened in the years since, yet Seattle must be seen as a part of a larger tapestry of resistance and at least partly the basis for the rapid emergence of the anti-empire second ‘superpower’ in response to the second Gulf War (Clark and Themudo, 2003; Hayduk; 2002; Shepard, 2004; Yuen, 2004). This article examines posts to email lists used by movement actors in the Seattle demonstrations. Since then, other more advanced forms of technology such as video-sharing services have been employed, yet the use of email lists has not diminished according to protest organizers, and it remains a key form of communication which, unlike video and other bandwidth draining technologies, is widely available around the world (Asaravala, 2003). Indeed, ‘old’ technologies appear not so much to be replaced as to become automatically incorporated into movement activities.

While previous research discusses the functions of internet communication by activists in the Seattle confrontation (Smith and Smythe, 2001a; Wall, 2002), here the focus is on how the lists were a space for participants to express identities related to the movement. Collective identities are important because they help attract new members and sustain old ones; collective identities are often what officials respond to and what make up the raw materials from which mainstream media representations will be constructed.

Social movement identities are the ‘process by which social actors recognize themselves and are recognized by other actors’ (della Porta and Diani, 2000: 85). Even though some observers argue that the internet is increasingly enabling new collective identities, we have little understanding of how collective identity processes work when social movements are online (Clark and Themudo, 2003). The importance of these issues reaches beyond these particular protests to social movement activities around the world and even into electoral political movements such as the internet-enabled rise of the 2004 US presidential candidate Howard Dean. Such processes need to be more than simply praised; they must be critically examined. This case study of postings to three email lists employed by organizers of the Seattle WTO protests finds that clearly, email is part of the activist’s cyber-toolkit, used to mobilize and educate movement...
actors by providing quick, constantly updated information, as well as easing many logistical communication tasks; yet, as a means for expressing movement identities, it is a useful but limited tool.

GLOBALIZATION AND NETWORKS

While the nature of globalization has been much debated in recent years, these processes – particularly those favoring economic and political interests – are seen often as a centralizing phenomenon, while the opposition to global corporate control is decentralized and diffuse (Greider, 1997; Klein, 2000; Korten, 1995). Viewed in this way, the opposition to the powers that be – such as the Global Justice Movement – gains its strength from employing almost a mirror opposite form of organization from those who seek to direct globalization of the world’s economy. Recently, however, observers have provided a more nuanced reading on the operation of power in a post-Fordist, post-industrial age, emphasizing the role of distributed networks both by the powerful and their opposition (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Hardt and Negri, 2004). Scholars such as Hardt and Negri (2004) argue that in fact today’s global empire is itself a networked phenomenon, deriving strength from dominant nation-states, multinational corporations and multilateral institutions. This argument can account for what have been called postmodern tendencies away from static power structures by providing a means for seeing how power has become more fluid and dispersed without necessarily losing strength.

Dyer-Witheford further argues that this global network of capital is but the latest iteration of capitalism as it constantly has adapted itself over the decades to those who resist it. That is, it constantly responds to its opponents, creating what he calls ‘cycles’ of struggles (1999: 62). Yet as capitalism becomes more global, it makes itself still more visible and identifiable, allowing opponents to identify each other, creating ‘new circuits of cooperation and collaboration that stretch across nations and continents and allow an unlimited number of encounters’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: xiii). That is, this networked global power enables and prompts global opposition, allowing the opposition to flourish, taking advantage of new formations and offering new configurations for resistance. Indeed, capital depends on these very opponents that Hardt and Negri have called ‘the multitude’ or ‘an open network of singularities that link together on the basis of the common [sic] they share and the common [sic] they produce’ (2004: 129). They argue that this resistance is not the mirror opposite of the power, but a set of groups which retain their differences even as they come together.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND IDENTITY

This ‘multitude’, which made up the disparate groups that came together in Seattle, Prague, Porto Allegre, Cancun and elsewhere, exercises power particularly through symbolic resources, such as by attempting to create new
discourses about globalization, discourses which can redirect how we talk about and see the processes of economic concentration. Such activities are inherent in the definition of a social movement, which has been described as a ‘sustained and self conscious challenge to authorities or cultural codes by a field of actors – organizations and advocacy networks – some of whom employ extra-institutional means of influence’ (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993: 115). In the process of attempting to change cultural codes, social movements also create new identities which both help to recruit and sustain membership. Previous research from the resource mobilization arena has focused on what movement members stood to gain, emphasizing the attainment of material resources or benefits. However, other research suggests that such an explanation does not account for the motivations of many movement actors organizing today. European social theory sees the social movements of the last few decades as marking a break with older social movements, such as those associated with organized labor (Buechler, 1995). For example, Earthfirst! and Reclaim the Streets are not focusing on job security but on more symbolic goals. Thus, if traditional markers such as class or occupation are less likely to characterize movement identity, then new means of explaining how movements operate must be employed.¹

Melucci (1995, 1996) emphasizes that social movements continue to reflect societal conflicts, but that those conflicts have moved beyond simply focusing on class and reflect instead post-industrial disruptions in today’s society. Indeed, this movement of movements is characterized not by identifiable leaders but by its affinity group or cell-like structure in which small, self-forming groups network with other like-minded groups and at times coordinate action and share information, but are not answerable to each other (Hayduk, 2002; Mertes, 2004). Some social movement theorists believe that identity is a key concept which can help us to understand today’s movements (Melucci, 1985, 1996). Collective identity is a ‘shared definition produced by several interacting individuals who are concerned with the orientations of their actions as well as the field of opportunities and constraints in which their actions take place’ (Melucci, 1989: 34).

Collective identity defines boundaries of who is within the group, what the group believes, how the group sees the world and, ultimately, helps to establish trust, which is essential in getting members to take actions that may be time-consuming, uncomfortable or even dangerous (della Porta and Diani, 2000). Because collective identity is ultimately a cultural process manifested through language and symbols, communication resources are necessary for any of these processes to succeed (Melucci, 1989).

Various researchers have sought to identify how collective identity is established. Taylor and Whittier offer a framework for assessing collective identity in social movements, which they believe provides a ‘conceptual bridge linking theoretical approaches in the symbolic interactionist tradition with
existing theory in social movements’ (1992: 105). Their three categories are: boundaries, consciousness and negotiation. Boundaries mark the territory of the group – who is part of the movement and who is not. This means that the movement must establish differences between itself and other societal entities in a process of self-affirmation. Consciousness encompasses the creation of cognitive frames or schemas for interpreting reality. Finally, their analytical framework suggests that negotiation is a category of significance to social movements as members often must resist dominant evaluations of themselves and their values and offer alternative means of thinking and acting in both public and private spheres. Their work builds on the earlier assessments of Melucci (1989), who describes collective identity as taking place via three similar dimensions: the production of cognitive definitions that establish movement goals; the establishment of a network of relationships (particularly evident in forms of organization, technologies of communication, etc.) among actors to communicate and negotiate; and creating emotional investment in which movement members feel as if they belong to the movement, allowing them to ‘recognize themselves in each other’ (Melucci, 1989: 35; 1995). The categories offered by Taylor and Whittier overlap with those outlined by Melucci; indeed, in his study of online feminist activism, Ayers (2002) created a combination from these different sets of categories.

Social movements and the internet
This study is concerned further with the interaction of social movements and the internet. In the past, movement actors often worked in isolation from each other but today, computer technology is enabling them to make global connections. Indeed, the internet is seen often as key to the activities of non-state actors involved in global movements such as those found in Seattle (Rodgers, 2003; Smith and Smythe, 2001a). New technologies allow non-governmental groups to communicate transnationally in ways that challenge the power of the state and market (Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Rodgers, 2003). In fact, communications technology appears to be changing the ability of social movements to carry out political organizing, or what researchers are calling ‘electronic’ advocacy (McNutt and Boland, 1999; Rodgers, 2003). More specifically, Denning (2001) identifies five general modes of internet communication by social movement activists:

- collection of information;
- publication of information;
- dialogue;
- coordinating action; and
- lobbying decision-makers.

More specifically, Smith and Smythe (2001a) found that the Seattle movement used the internet to organize, educate and mobilize, while
similarly Wall (2002) found that anti-WTO activists used it to mobilize, network, amplify information and resist hegemonic information hierarchies. The internet is particularly important as a means of countering the status quo, which tends to dominate most political discussions (Ayres, 1999; Cleaver 1998; Kahn and Kellner, 2004). Coombs (1998) argues that the internet may increase the power of grass roots groups because it can enable networks of citizens to challenge corporate control, while Smith and Smythe (2001a, 2001b) note that the internet has opened up a political space for the alternative political messages of this global social movement just as progressive email communications has been described as serving as 'an alternative political realm' (Downing, 1989: 156). For optimists, these changes also appear to have opened up new spaces for public and private participation as well as broadened public participation in political matters (Rheingold, 1993, 2002; Smith and Smythe, 2001a; Van Aelst, 2002). Cleaver (1998) sees the rise of new political formations via the combination of social movements and the internet.

In terms of the connections between movement identities and the internet, researchers are still struggling to understand this phenomenon. Warkentin (2001) believes that the internet is enabling global identity-formation for movement organizations. Postmes and Brunsting (2002) are also optimistic, arguing that the anonymity and isolation found on the internet may actually enhance group salience, as actors focus on commonalities rather than differences. Indeed, they believe that the internet may allow social movement actors to unite and act more easily, attracting more new members than otherwise would be possible. Other researchers are more circumspect in finding online social movement identities mirroring real-world counterparts. Ayers (2002), who compared online feminist organizations with real-world ones, did not find overwhelming evidence that social movement identities automatically follow a real-world group online.

Despite enthusiasm for the internet's role in social movement activity, a number of caveats remain. Some observers acknowledge the power and potential of the internet but caution against overestimating what it can do (Clark and Themudo, 2003). Pessimistic observers look to a broader social context, arguing that the patterns of internet control suggest that the dominance by a handful of companies over much of the world's communication system is merely replicated on the internet, while suggesting that the internet in no way guarantees grass roots participation or more widespread democracy (McChesney, 1998). In terms of power, reliance on the internet may well privilege certain groups, languages, genders or countries to the exclusion of others (Clark and Themudo, 2003; Kole, 1998; Kramer and Kramarae, 1999). Surveillance is an increasing concern as some corporations are monitoring movement internet usage, and law enforcement, intelligence and other agencies are logging on to monitor social movements, actors and others that challenge the status quo (Coombs, 1998; Kahn and Kellner, 2004). In addition, face-to-face connections
remain important, and failing to focus on human contacts in favor of technology may mean diverting precious resources from other areas (Carlsson, 1995; Danitz and Strobel, 1999).

**METHOD**

**Framework for analysis**

The Seattle protests were chosen as a case study because they were a prototype for a series of global protests which have followed and are continuing. They were notable for a number of reasons – the protests were one of the largest and most visible challenges to economic globalization to take place in the USA. Many of the tactics, from use of the internet to its organizational form, were imitated subsequently and built upon at demonstrations that followed.

The author subscribed to these three lists via online email list services (Listbot and Onelist), downloading all the emails from each list from their inception in early to mid-1999 to mid-December 1999 (two weeks after the WTO summit ended). For this analysis, systematic sampling with a random start date of every third email from each list was used for a total of 600 emails (200 from each list). All lists were open to the public and set up on a commercial email service which allowed anyone to subscribe or unsubscribe anonymously whenever they wanted. These lists were selected because they represented a range of views and participants. One list was moderated and more reformist and policy-oriented, the other two were not moderated, were more radical and aimed to eliminate the WTO. This split was an essential characteristic of the movement both in Seattle and the protests that followed (Kidd, 2003; Wall, 2003). For the reformists, institutions are key to creating social and political change. The reformists tended to be associated with established non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, etc., which were concerned with the mainstream credibility of their critique and, ultimately, with their ability to influence policies. For the radicals, political spaces and participation are seen as both more local and global. Rather than attempting to work with established institutions, they seek to dismantle them. These tended to be associated with more grass roots associations and networks with fewer formal structures.

List number 1 was intended to help facilitate organizing those related to opposing the WTO during its Seattle meeting, particularly among Pacific Northwest members of the Direct Action Network. It was established in September 1999 as an unmoderated list and reflected the more radical opposition that sought to dismantle the WTO completely. The list was discontinued in autumn 2000. From its September inception until mid-December, the list ran 630 emails. Direct Action Network was composed of radical grass roots groups with connections in the old growth forest movements. Also involved were real-world groups such the Ruckus Society and the Rainforest Action Network.
Its primary nodes were in Seattle, Olympia, Portland, Vancouver, San Francisco
and Santa Cruz, and it was seen as primarily a West Coast driven entity
(Guilloud, 2002). The Direct Action Network was characterized by its reliance
on affinity groups, the consensus process and popular education techniques,
which included street theater and giant puppets (de Armond, 2001; Finnegan,
2000). The Direct Action Network inspired, organized and directed much of
the civil disobedience in the streets which disrupted the meetings (de Armond,
2001; Finnegan, 2000). Post-Seattle, some critics cited its lack of diversity,
making it a young, white, middle-class entity, as well as its failure to embrace
fully the much-covered anarchist Black Bloc which damaged corporate
property during the protests (Cockburn and St Clair, 2000; Wong, 2002).
Interestingly, in a report distributed by the RAND Corporation, Direct Action
Network is characterized as having ‘goals and consultative strategy sufficiently
broad to encompass all the protesters’ grievances’ (de Armond, 2001: 204).

List number 2 was intended to facilitate communication among individuals
interested in oppositional preparations leading up the WTO meeting in Seattle.
It was informally affiliated with the People’s Global Action/Assembly network.
It started as a moderated list in February 1999 shortly after the announcement
that the WTO would meet in Seattle, but quickly shifted to unmoderated in
response to subscriber requests. It reflected a range of opinions and stands
concerning the WTO. The list was discontinued in autumn 2000. From its
February inception until mid-December, the list ran 577 emails. The People’s
Global Action/Assembly network formed in solidarity with the Zapatistas of
Chiapas, Mexico, who rose up in the early 1990s in response to the North
American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which Mexico signed with Canada
and the USA. Opposed to this and all other global trade agreements, this
international coalition aims to dismantle the WTO. It advocates civil
disobedience, direct action and confrontation with the powers that be to
achieve its aims. It is noted for the broad range of its coalition, with
representation from disempowered groups located in the so-called ‘Global
South’, for its emphasis on decentralization as key to the movement, and for its
use of the internet (Clark and Themudo, 2003; Cleaver, 1998). Representing 10
movements from every continent, the People’s Global Action/Assembly is
considered by some a coordinating tool rather than an organization, with no
designated spokespeople and a website as its main means of coordination (Clark
and Themudo, 2003). It has even been said not to ‘really exist’ as an
organization but as an ‘interconnected web’ (People’s Global Action, 2004: 216).
Its key activity in Seattle was bringing a cross-country caravan of grass roots
activists from ‘Global South’ countries to represent the voices of those affected
by trade policies but generally invisible to policymakers and the public.

List number 3 was intended to facilitate information-sharing about the
WTO and its policies among NGOs. It was affiliated with Friends of the Earth
(Europe). This list was moderated, established in May 1999 and continues today.
It reflected a more reformist approach to the WTO. From its May inception until mid-December 1999, the list ran 527 emails. Friends of the Earth is a mainstream NGO which bills itself as one of the largest grassroots environmental networks, its campaigns focusing on sustainability and the environment with more than 30 organizations at the national level. Its focus is on affecting governmental policies and shaping public opinion with regards to environmental issues. Its email list in particular was identified as a major informational tool for the WTO protests (George, 2000). Other observers describe the organization as symbiotic with the Global Justice Movement but not a part of it (Clark and Themudo, 2003).

A total of 600 emails beginning in February 1999 to December 1999 were analyzed from the three lists. Because this study concentrated on email content, what was studied were the actual posts to the lists, thus leaving out the role of ‘lurkers’. Previous assessments of the movement indicate the groups’ stands on the issues (as noted previously). What is at issue here is how they did or did not express identities via email lists. The overall research question was: ‘How did the email lists express collective identities?’

In order to create more specific analytical categories, the study drew on Melucci’s (1989) and Taylor and Whittier’s (1992) conceptual categories for social movement identities. As noted earlier, other researchers have employed variations on these categories to assess movement identities. Each list was examined for the ways in which it created frames, drew boundaries and established emotional investments. Movement frames are part of the process described by Taylor and Whittier (1992) of creating a consciousness or a way of viewing movement issues. Thus, the emails were examined to see if they contained substantive information about the issues that suggested subscribers should adopt a particular view of the WTO and related issues. A further question was: Did the emails attempt to establish boundaries concerning who was or was not part of the movement? This would be found in discussions of who ‘we’ are or are not, what the movement stands for or against, etc. Finally, the emails were examined to see if they encouraged emotional investment on the part of subscribers. That is, did they encourage personal connections with the movement and its members? It should be noted that not every email necessarily would express collective identity; the goal was to detect general patterns.

It should be noted that this project takes a snapshot of a particular moment on these particular lists, while acknowledging that movement identities are fluid and multiple. This study is limited by the fact that it is focused only on three email lists during one event and that each list was established by people living in the northern hemisphere. This study neither probes the connection between the real-world groups and their virtual counterparts, nor the issue of lurkers who indeed might have a very different notion of the movement’s identity or not be a part of any of these groups or the movement at all. While it has been common in some internet research to assume membership based on seemingly weak
evidence, such as simply visiting a website indicating community membership (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), this project does not assume all real-world members of the group are also online or that all those online are members of the movement. As has been observed in earlier communal identity contexts, public actors do not necessarily express the opinions of spectators and thus any medium purporting to represent the whole, but hearing only from certain voices may well create a false public (Lippmann, 1925).

DISCUSSION
Expressing movement identities
What follows is an assessment of the ways in which the lists expressed collective identity via the three characteristics associated with social movement identities outlined previously.

Frames
As described by social movement researchers, one of the ways in which collective identities come into being is through the establishment of frames for the issues at hand (Snow and Benford, 1992). This appears to have been done on these lists mainly through the emailing of substantive posts about the issues. The Friends of the Earth list consisted primarily of emails that framed the issues, generally via forwarded information from various sources such as mainstream news media stories, as well as reports and releases from NGOs working on the issues being debated at the WTO conference. While some emails of articles reporting on the WTO or corporate viewpoints were merely forwarded without an explicit oppositional frame, other articles were topped with cues on how to read what followed. For example, one email includes this introduction: ‘The press once referred to her as “the Ralph Nader of Canada” and that is high praise indeed from our perspective. She has been our strongest Canadian ally’, and then goes on to run an article from Toronto’s National Post by Maude Barlow, which begins:

The dominant development model of our time is economic globalization, a system fueled by the belief that a single global economy with universal rules set by global corporations and financial markets is inevitable. Everything is for sale, even those areas of life once considered sacred. Increasingly, these services and resources are controlled by a handful of transnational corporations. (Jones, 1999)

Here, the poster tops the email with cues on how to read what follows, which articulates part of the frame for the movement’s position from an NGO perspective. While Friends of the Earth sometimes provided such cues, at other times it did not. Thus, articles that seemed to support a pro-WTO view would be forwarded along with those which appeared to supply evidence against the international body’s practices – both sometimes without comment, most likely on the assumption that subscribers would follow the
preferred reading. By relying frequently on information produced by other sources (the news media, for example), the Friends of the Earth frames seem less flexible. Perhaps trying to establish new counter frames from scratch might prove more difficult, although ultimately necessary to introduce a more radical message. On a broader level, almost all of the Friends of the Earth posts do suggest a frame in terms of not only what a particular position on an issue should be, but that the WTO should be addressed as a policy issue (as opposed to a civil disobedience issue, for example).

The People’s Global Action/Assembly list also supplied frames via forwarded material such as articles supportive of a particular viewpoint or articles topped with cues on how to read them. Overall, however, these sorts of emails were much less predominant than on the Friends of the Earth list. It also appears that the discussions which took place on this list were attempts to create frames, but because posters were often in disagreement, no agreed-upon frame seems to have developed other than the WTO needed to be opposed. Some posters seemed to believe capitalism was the ultimate problem, while others simply saw a lack of oversight of corporations as the problem.

While Friends of the Earth’s subscribers were bombarded with the latest NGO reports and news stories that provided frames to be dismissed or embraced, Direct Action Network’s list was almost devoid of substantive material which framed the issues. In other materials distributed for public consumption, Direct Action Network provided a clear frame for its position on the WTO, but this list was striking for its lack of material on why members so adamantly opposed the WTO or how they believed the issues should be interpreted. In part, this seems to have occurred because the list was not used to educate members but rather to facilitate communication among a group that already agreed on its stance on the issues.

**Boundaries**

Of the three lists, the People’s Global Action/Assembly list most consistently and directly addressed the issue of who was or was not a part of the movement. This was done primarily through debate and discussion. Were right-wing nationalist groups part of the movement? Were those espousing a more reformist view? What about those following a more radical agenda? The discussion of movement positions and values were part of an ongoing process to delineate boundaries. In this example, one poster wrote:

I have no idea on the level of collaboration with anti WTO republicans which is being planned for Seattle. Reports I have heard vary to saying there is none, to saying loads. In Europe, this is the kind of collaboration that is unlikely to happen, except by some of the most reformist, and depoliticised NGOs. More radical groups are making active attempts to distance our anti globalisation discourse from that of the right, since people are starting to view this overlap of interests between left and right (which is very superficial) against globalisation as being potentially very dangerous. (Beck, 1999)
Interestingly, the list seems to have spent less time clarifying the WTO and its supporters as the ‘out group’, focusing instead on assessing to what extent they agreed with other oppositional groups. For example, some emails suggest that list subscribers who pose particular questions or argue certain points themselves might be working against the movement:

I urge you to name these true saboteurs among us now – expose them and their counter-revolutionary tactics so we may condemn them! Unless, of course, IT’S YOU. (Trace, 1999)

In contrast, the Direct Action Network list spent little time on establishing group boundaries; for the most part, members did not debate who was or was not a part of the movement. This is most likely because the group was more cohesive geographically (limited mostly to the Pacific Northwest), and because the list reflected a real-world network of people who were meeting face-to-face also. Boundary-defining discussions did take place after the WTO protests had occurred; members debated the efficacy of property damage and the relationship between Direct Action Network and the anarchists, or indeed, which members saw themselves as anarchists and what that meant for the movement. For example, one subscriber wrote:

If the Black Bloc’s notion of revolutionary tactics is so empty that you are proud of helping gang-bangers steal labels, you should pay closer attention to the work of liberals, capitalist collaborators, aging hippies or whatever you consider us no-BB types (I was called these and many other names; none fit) … By inserting the tactic of window-breaking into the larger N30 actions, the Black Bloc got some people hurt … That’s why it was attacked by people speaking not only for Direct Action Network, but for most every other major coalition member. (Rogers, 1999)

The Friends of the Earth list almost never addressed directly who was or was not in the movement. In part, this may have been because it was a moderated list that served mainly to distribute information; it rarely hosted or encouraged discussion. It may be that boundaries were indirectly suggested on this (and the other lists) by the way that participants identified themselves. On the Friends of the Earth list, for example, posters almost always provided their complete name and signature lines with professional contact information, such as a work telephone number and mailing address. This rarely happened on the other two lists. It is possible that these varying list formats served as cues to list subscribers of the sort of people who would or would not be part of the movement. For Friends of the Earth, it suggests that movement members are professionally involved with the issues via the NGOs which employ them. This contrasts with the informality found on the Direct Action Network list, whose emails were often signed with nicknames (‘tree’) or a single letter, suggesting a level of intimacy among members. The rarity of a professional signature line suggests that this segment of the movement was
not focused on formal responses but took a more ‘amateur’ or grass roots approach. The People’s Global Action/Assembly list was a mix of both formal and informal signatures and posts.

**Emotional investment**

Emotional investment appear to have been encouraged, particularly by the Direct Action Network list’s calls for assistance and participation in the oppositional activities to the WTO. The emails aimed at getting group members to pitch in with various tasks or to donate their time and efforts. Some sought or offered items or services such as housing; other emails sought to help organize events prior to the protests. For example, this email solicited help from list members:

```
Howdy all!
Please come and join us in performing our Trolloween street theater piece downtown this week!! We will be meeting Tuesday 11/9 at Westlake fountain at 5pm, and again Saturday 11/13 at noon Westlake fountain. We have all the props and puppets, all you need to do is bring yourself (and wear black if you can) The piece lasts about 10 minutes, and is easy for new folks to plug into. (Leni, 1999)
```

Emotional investment would seem to be especially important for groups such as the Direct Action Network, which were planning large-scale acts of civil disobedience, some of which put participants at personal, physical risk and could only succeed with complete cooperation among group members.

With the People’s Global Action/Assembly list, there were fewer calls for participating in real-world action and activities, although these did appear on the list. This may have been in part a function of the list having a more geographically-dispersed subscriber base. One of the most common activities on the list was the posting of opinions and viewpoints, and, in this way, this list too seems to have enabled a type of emotional investment in the movement. When this list was first established in early spring 2003 it was a moderated list, which the organizer converted to unmoderated when subscribers complained about the format, calling for more opportunities to discuss the issues. The emails that seemed to prompt the most reaction and emotion were those which articulated opinions and stances about the upcoming demonstrations and the issues surrounding them. In this subtle way, subscribers appear to have been encouraging each other to engage in dialogue.

The Friends of the Earth emails rarely asked subscribers to partake in any real-world group activities, although they did occasionally encourage subscribers to contact politicians or sign petitions. For example, one email read in part:

```
On October 1 the EU trade ministers are to hold an extraordinary informal meeting with the European Commission. Pascal Lamy to prepare the Community’s position for the WTO 3rd ministerial conference in Seattle…
If you have not written to your minister previously, protest letters need to be
```

faxed right away today, the latest tomorrow. Please find below a list of EU national trade ministers and a sample letter. (Edwards, 1999)

Such calls were not only rare, they are also strikingly different in tone from those on the Direct Action Network list, which expressed a level of unguarded enthusiasm and personal intimacy lacking in the more rational and policy-oriented posts of Friends of the Earth.

CONCLUSION
This analysis suggests that the lists emphasized different means of expressing collective identities, with the Friends of the Earth list more focused on framing the issues; the People’s Global Action/Assembly list on establishing boundaries for who was or was not in the movement and even within factions inside the movement; and the Direct Action Network list on creating emotional connections. None was entirely successful in all three categories. Some differences among the lists may be due in part to the nature of the organizations sponsoring them, as displayed in Table 1 below.

In terms of their levels of professionalization, the Direct Action Network and People’s Global Action/Assembly were both grass roots groups which, although linked with other more established outfits, remained so-called street groups; whereas Friends of the Earth was a professional NGO, created to address a specific issue – the environment – long before the WTO protests. To use Diani’s (2000) terminology, the former types tend to rely on participatory resources or the contributions of volunteers’ time and energy and the latter on professional resources, thus reflecting a more structured and hierarchical organizational form. This seems reflected in terms of the nature and origin of the email posts seen on each of these lists. The Direct Action Network consisted almost entirely of emails created by list members; the People’s Global Action/Assembly also contained a large share of list member-generated content. This was not true for the Friends of the Earth list, which consistently forwarded pre-written materials such as NGO reports, mainstream news articles and press releases from other professional entities involved in organizing, reporting on or responding to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>• Table 1 Comparison of email lists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRIMARILY REAL OR VIRTUAL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
protests. That the lists differed should not come as a surprise; after all, this movement’s diversity has been repeatedly noted. Unlike earlier assessments of social movements in which such diversity has been identified commonly as a weakness that leads to a diluted message and chaotic vision, this movement’s diversity has been called its strength (Mertes, 2004). Indeed, such formations fit with Hardt and Negri’s (2004) argument that this global movement consists of ‘multitudes’ which do not try to erase difference, but rather allow disparate groups to maintain their differences and still come together. Indeed, just because the lists differ, they should not be seen as acting against each other or not acting indirectly in collaboration with each other.

Identity expression
Of the three lists, the Direct Action Network’s was much more likely to express collective dentity via offering opportunities for emotional investment. It did so through its encouragement to subscribers to help out, asking them to provide housing and transportation, attend events and generally pitch in so that the protests would succeed. Their approach to making these emotional connections was a sort of ‘barn raising’ attitude, that the protests would be successful only if everyone worked together. Such emails seemed to have been meant to motivate movement members to be an active part of the movement. In addition, with their nicknames, misspelled words and typos, their emails suggested informality but also friendship. (This may also reflect a sense of self-protection among the subscribers concerned with surveillance by law authorities or corporate infiltrators.) On the People’s Global Action/Assembly list, the potential for becoming emotionally invested occurred particularly through the freewheeling discussions of the issues as well as movement strategies and tactics. These discussions sometimes became heated and often involved direct responses to other posts, turning the list at times into a virtual coffeehouse. In contrast, Friends of the Earth provided few opportunities to make a direct emotional investment, in part because the emails were almost never created personally by the posters, but consisted of forwarded information intended for mass distribution. Of course, these means of expressing an emotional connection are particular to this case study; other lists and groups might have employed other ways of creating emotional investment, such as focusing on perceived injustices perpetrated against group members or making a conscious effort to ‘brand’ their organization.

In another indication of collective identity, Friends of the Earth by far posted the most emails that expressed identity via frames. Often, these frames were offered via redistributed information such as mainstream newspaper stories as opposed to, for example, first-person accounts of protesters’ experiences. The forwarding of pre-created content is a more passive action than the expression of new, personalized content. Maintaining a professional, detached tone, the list hosts seem to have expected members to engage
intellectually with the issues and see them as policy issues. The People’s Global Action/Assembly also provided frames for the issues at hand through forwarded materials and discussions, although not as frequently as Friends of the Earth. The Direct Action Network offered few frames for the substantive issues associated with the WTO. It is likely that this happened because members were already in general agreement. Thus the list’s content was mostly original, created for the list itself.

In the third indicator of collective identity, the People’s Global Action/Assembly list reflected its less cohesive status as posters struggled to establish boundaries – not in terms of the WTO so much as in terms of other oppositional groups. The Direct Action Network rarely attempted to establish boundaries until after the protests ended and a rift not clearly visible before the event arose in terms of the anarchists and property damage. With Friends of the Earth, boundaries were rarely expressed, as the list did not seek to establish intimacy among list subscribers. Their posts seem to assume a broadcast function.

Among the differences that might have impacted the need to establish boundaries was whether the group was primarily a real-world entity or a virtual one. Here, the Direct Action Network and Friends of the Earth were both real-world groups: the former a newly-formed network of grass roots activists and more radical NGOs; the latter group based on a well-established European NGO working with a network of like-minded environmental outfits. Because they were associated with real-world entities, it is possible that posters to these lists saw less reason to establish boundaries because they may have been considered already set. Although People’s Global Action/Assembly was derived from a global group associated with the Zapatista movement, it was not an arm of that network, which itself has been described as too decentralized to constitute an organization per se. It was more of a virtual group and thus needed to spend more time establishing who it was.

In sum, each of the lists was characterized by different emphases in terms of expressing collective identities. Whether one type of identity expression is more powerful than another is difficult to say, but it would seem that when posters are engaged more actively in creating or contributing personally to identity expressions, it would be more likely to have lasting effects. If that is the case, then the ways in which emotional investment was expressed on the Direct Action Network list and the ways in which boundaries were drawn on the People’s Global Action/Assembly list would seem to have more impact on movement members than the passive reception of the issue frames distributed on the moderated Friends of the Earth list. That said, it was the Friends of the Earth list which has survived the longest – whether simply because of its institutional support or other reasons is unclear. It may be that the other two lists consisted of members with more fluid connections, allowing them to
regroup within other street-level entities as the movement has evolved. That is, they did not leave the movement but merely joined different groups.

While Diani (2000) has suggested that computer-mediated communication will have little effect on identity-building and maintenance by groups relying primarily on professional resources, the findings here suggest that street-groups dependent on symbolic resources tended not to be completely focused on identity expression either. No one list rated high across all three identity categories. While these email lists potentially could express social movement identities, they were not always doing so. Thus, this analysis suggests that email can be helpful in organizing and educating within social movements, but in terms of expressing identities, it is a useful but limited tool. This may be because social movements require a level of participation, commitment and trust that internet communication does not always create. However, recalling Lippmann’s ‘Phantom Public’ (1925), it could be that social movement identities, as we have known them, are but a false unity representing only certain dominant actors’ points of view, and that now with internet communication a broader, more diverse range of identities is being introduced which cannot always be unified, even via the movement’s own communications.

Notes
1 There has been some debate over whether it is helpful to delineate ‘new’ and ‘old’ social movements. Downing (2001), for example, argues that such lines are arbitrary and less helpful than thinking in terms of how some actors today are left out of institutional politics.
2 Although each of these lists was public, following Gurak (1997), the email identities have been changed for privacy purposes; excerpts from the posts are printed verbatim.

References


Jones, A. (1999) ‘Subject: Maud Barlow: Global Rules Could Paralyze Us (Fwd)’, 1 September, StopWTORound@ONElist.com.


Trace, V. (1999) ‘Subject: R.E: Reformists Sabotaging PGA Caravan’, 12 October, WTOSeattleDiscussion@listbot.com


MELISSA A. WALL studies and teaches international communication, internet activism and blogging at California State University – Northridge. Her research has been published in *Gazette, Javnost, Journal of Middle East Media, Journalism, Journalism Studies, Media, Culture & Society, Popular Communication and Journal of Development Communications*. Address: California State University – Northridge, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Northridge, CA 91330-8311, USA. [email: melissa.a.wall@csun.edu]