A Marxist and an Anarchist Walk into the Occupy Movement: internal and external communication practices of radical left groups

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A Marxist and an Anarchist Walk into the Occupy Movement

Internal and External Communication Practices of Radical Left Groups

Thomas Swann

INTRODUCTION

The uprisings that occurred around the world in 2011 (the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement and the Spanish Indignados/15M), as well as subsequent protest movements in Brazil (2013) and Turkey (2013–2014), have been characterised as social media revolutions due to the use by participants of online platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Castells 2012; Mason 2012). A number of studies, however, have shown that this is often an inaccurate representation and that traditional forms of communication, such as face-to-face interaction, together with traditional older forms of online media (such as e-mail networks, fora, websites), are considered by participants to be more central to these events than newer social media (Fuchs 2014a, 85).

Nonetheless, the specifically social nature of social media (or Web 2.0) has allowed protestors to contribute to the democratic culture of phenomena like the Occupy camps. While social media have also been used to strengthen undemocratic forms of organisation (indeed, their design allows for the extraction of data that can be sold to advertisers and used by intelligence agencies), social media platforms do hold the potential for non-hierarchical and democratic forms of communication and organisa-
tion (i.e., those forms of organisation where decisions are made collectively, and not on the basis of orders delivered to subordinates by those above them in a chain of command). In this chapter, I will highlight this potential in relation to the communication practices of several radical left groups (the Socialist Workers International, the Socialist Alternative, the Local Anarchist Group, the Syndicalist Union, Environmental Action, Fight Racism Now and the Community Alliance), showing where social media and, more generally, ‘many-to-many’ communication can play a role in strengthening the political practices of the radical left. The point of this discussion is, therefore, to understand what these groups can learn from some of the best practices of the 2011 uprisings and later protests.

In order to fulfil this aim, I begin by defining the notions of ‘one-to-one’, ‘one-to-many’ and ‘many-to-many’ communication, before moving on to discuss the internal and external communication practices of several radical left groups and the extent to which they make use of social and other online media in their communication. The chapter goes on to examine whether, and in what ways, these groups’ communication practices represent a ‘prefigurative’ politics that agrees with their radical left principles; in other words, it asks whether the ways in which they communicate, both internally and externally, actually reflect their core political commitments. I will close by suggesting that a greater uptake of many-to-many communication in general, and social media more specifically, could contribute to these groups being more genuinely radically left-wing, in the sense that they would allow the groups to be more faithful, in the here and now, to their visions of non-hierarchical and democratic processes.

MANY-TO-MANY COMMUNICATION

The first explicit reference to ‘many-to-many’ communication in academic literature can be found in a little-cited article on the principles of human communication written by the Swiss-American psychologist Jurgen Ruesch. While Ruesch does not go into any detail on the topic, or even properly define the phrase, he does list it as being one of several modes of communication within groups (Ruesch 1957, 158). Following this early categorisation of many-to-many communication, its use in academic research gradually expanded during the 1960s and 1970s, mainly in the fields of computing and systems theory and almost exclusively in relation to the material aspects of electronic systems, rather than their social aspects. Exceptions to this focus are, for the most part, concerned with telecommunications and its relation to organisation (e.g., McManamon 1975; Sherwood 1976; Watanabe, Watanabe and Agata 1980).

One of the most interesting contributions to this debate is, like Ruesch’s, rather obscure. Chandler Harrison Stevens’s working paper,
written in 1981 during his time at the MIT Sloan School of Management, highlights some of the earliest examples of networked technology being used to facilitate this form of communication. Much of what Stevens writes envisions a use of technology that is commonplace today in the form of, for example, Skype video conferencing, Facebook events, e-mail networks, forums, wikis and sites like Yahoo Answers. Stevens also describes a means of using an electronic network for voting and providing instantaneous feedback (Stevens 1981, 21–30), something akin to e-democracy. From the 1990s on, the concept of many-to-many communication became much more prevalent.  

More recent scholarship on the distinction between one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication, includes the work of Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Rasmus Helles, who provide the following answers to the question ‘who gets to say something to how many?’:

One-to-one communication refers to the personal or face-to-face communication that takes place between two people or in a small group. In terms of technological mediation, this would include email, SMS text messaging and voice calls and instant messengers.

One-to-many communication refers to what is traditionally thought of as mass media: newspapers and radio and television broadcasting. The technology of this type of communication includes books, newspapers, audio and video recording, simple websites, downloading, radio and television.

Many-to-many communication refers to the communication that takes place in networks where everyone participating is able to send and receive information to and from everyone else in the network. The technological mediation of many-to-many communication would include wikis, blogs, social network sites, online chatrooms and, potentially, micro-blogging sites (Jensen and Helles 2011, 519–20, original emphasis).

Of this third form of communication, arguably the most important when discussing social media, Denis McQuail writes: “This category includes especially the uses of the Internet for sharing and exchanging information, ideas and experience and developing active (computer-mediated) personal relationships”. This definition points to the concept of interaction, one of the key features of many-to-many communication (McQuail 2010, 144).

It should be noted that, while some authors claim either explicitly (Crosbie 2006) or implicitly (Rheingold 2000; Shirky 2009) that the development of the Internet, the web and social media (collectively termed ‘social software’ by Lawley (2003)) have made many-to-many communication possible, there are, as Jensen and Helles point out, some precedents: examples include a marketplace, a sports stadium, graffiti and community notice boards (Jensen and Helles 2011, 520). Indeed, the classic instances of many-to-many communication in the political sphere...
(and which still inform political accounts of communication to this day) are over two and a half thousand years old: the agorae and assemblies of ancient Greece (see Graeber 2013, 155).

It is not, therefore, that the Internet and social media have made many-to-many communication possible, but rather that they help to facilitate an established process. Of course, while the existence of many-to-many communication helps exemplify a large part of what is social about social media (the interaction), a critical account of both ‘the social’ and ‘social media’ must, as Christian Fuchs argues, also include material drawn from a range of social theorists, including, vitally, the ideas of cooperation and coproduction taken from Karl Marx (Fuchs 2014a, 40–42). The focus of this chapter remains, however, the question of communication and sharing information, rather than coproduction as such.

As mentioned above, a central focus of my discussion will turn on the question of whether many-to-many communication practices, together with social media forms, have the potential to prefigure radical-left ideas about the creation of more desirable social relations than those that are currently commonplace. For a contemporary radical-left politics, the core ethical and political principles can be characterised as the contestation of hierarchies of power, the opposition to mediation and a privileging of prefigurative methods (Franks 2012, 216; see also Maecckelbergh 2009). While a number of those who champion social media and many-to-many communication would argue that this is exactly what they have in mind, and might even describe themselves as radicals, many left activists and scholars would argue that this misses a crucial, if not essential, aspect of the radical left critique: the opposition to economic exploitation and capitalism, be it networked and decentralised (as many-to-many communication promises) or structured as a traditional hierarchy. As suggested above, social media exist not in order to facilitate radical conceptions of democracy and economic decision making, but to capture personal data from users and sell it to advertisers. As Fuchs (2014b) makes clear, this is very similar to the type of economic exploitation Marx described in the nineteenth century: a surplus value is extracted from the labour social media users perform. Indeed, in the case of social media use, there is no financial remuneration for the labour that creates the advertising data. This also entails the same types of inequalities Marx examined, in terms of wealth, access to resources and power.

Nevertheless, while many-to-many communication and networked technologies do not necessitate radical practices, they do present the potential for genuinely radical communication and organisation. What I want to suggest here is that, for a radical left group which adheres to the kinds of organisational structure that are common to the contemporary radical left (a decentralised system with members and sub-groups enjoying high levels of autonomy from any form of centralisation), and that operates under routine liberal-democratic circumstances, one might ex-
pect many-to-many forms of communication to be the norm, both within the group and in the group’s engagement with other activists and members of the public. This is because the (ideal or potential) nature of many-to-many communication practices mirror the non-hierarchical and radically democratic nature of radical left politics. At any rate, many-to-many communication practices can be said to be more inherently non-hierarchical than one-to-many communication, which, one could argue, have an essentially top-down structure of one (or a few) communicating a fixed message to many.

Indeed, activists involved in some of the Occupy camps characterised many-to-many communication as having this potential for non-hierarchical, autonomous practices, even if the reality is more problematic than many of the theorists of this form of communication make out. For example, one Indignados/15M activist involved in a large-scale Occupy camp described the use of tools such as collaborative pads (where documents can be modified synchronously by a group) and discussion platforms like Mumble (an open source programme like Skype but focussed on assemblies and consensus decision making). This activist argued that “the key concept is horizontality, where everyone has the same right to speak and contribute, and in a really open manner” (Indignados/15M activist).

Another activist who participated in one of the smaller Occupy protests highlighted this aspect as well, saying that “it adds another dimension to the openness and the whole landscape of communication tools we have” (Occupy activist). However, these and other activists, while recognising the potential for many-to-many communication and networked technology to reduce the hierarchies present in social movements, are also very aware of the limitations:

I think it’s good, I mean there’s a lot of space for new ways of doing things and of course communication is one of the key elements. We have the Internet but it can be used against us as well. It’s not a magic solution to all of our problems but it is a really important thing (Occupy activist).

As well as programmes like Mumble and collaborative pads, activists also made use of the alternative social network N-1, which was developed by collectives in Spain as an activist alternative to Facebook.

COMMUNICATION PRACTICES ON THE RADICAL LEFT

In this section, I want to move on from the theoretical discussion of many-to-many, networked communication and technologies and examine how the radical left groups involved in this study communicate, both within their groups and in the larger environment, with other activists and members of the public. This research involved semi-structured, in-
depth, open-ended interviews with eighteen activists on the radical left, and included members of seven established groups as well as activists involved in two Occupy camps and other campaigns. The groups are all active in one Northern European country which has a small but well-established radical-left movement. The interviews were carried out between February and November 2013 in a radical-left milieu within which I had been involved as an activist for around four years. The interviews conducted in person were recorded and transcribed and sections were coded (for references to organisational structure, communication practices, social media, etc.) using a mix of NVivo and manual coding. These interviews are used to highlight the different communication practices engaged in by various radical-left groups. Seven groups are involved in this study: the Socialist Workers International and the Socialist Alternative (both on the Marxist side of the radical left), the Local Anarchist Group, the Syndicalist Union, and Environmental Action (belonging to the anarchist wing) and Fight Racism Now and the Community Alliance (defined as neither Marxist nor anarchist).

A broad distinction is made here between internal and external communication practices. Internal communication, for the purpose of this chapter, refers to the communication practices in which members of radical-left groups engage when discussing issues amongst themselves and when making decisions about what actions the group should take. External communication, conversely, refers to the communication practices radical-left groups engage in with activists and members of the public who are not considered members of these organisations. This distinction is often problematised as sometimes internal meetings will involve non-members, either through invitation or by making the meeting more open than others. However, for the sake of simplicity, I will characterise the communication practices used by radical-left groups as either broadly internal or broadly external.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

How, then, do the radical left groups involved in this study communicate internally? One of the most common features of groups on the radical left is a federated structure with a network of activists organised into local groups and working groups focussed on a particular campaign or topic. This is indicative of the fact that most of these groups developed out of the alter-globalisation movement and, therefore, share much of the organisational structure developed within that movement. While not all of these groups are explicitly anarchist, there is a broad resemblance to anarchist politics in their organisational structure and core political principles. In the examples of the Syndicalist Union and Environmental Action, subgroups operate autonomously within the overall priorities or
strategies of the larger organisations. This model of organisation works recursively in the sense that the local and working groups are structured and operate in much the same way as their larger umbrella or parent organisations, with different smaller groups of activists dealing with specific campaigns.

In addition to these explicitly anarchist groups, there are also examples on the radical left of both Marxist and undefined leftist groups operating along similar lines. Fight Racism Now, the Socialist Alternative and the Community Alliance all attempt to eliminate organisational hierarchies by using a democratic structure based on consensus decision making and by allowing different groups within the organisation to work autonomously on their own campaigns. While these collectives highlight the non-hierarchical nature of many of the groups on the radical left, the example of the Socialist Workers International points towards a more typical party structure, with a hierarchically organised branch system and a central committee and congress making the decisions.

Of the groups adhering to the more or less anarchist model of organisation, the general meeting seems to be the most ubiquitous form of internal communication which, depending on the dynamics of the meetings in question, can be considered a form of many-to-many communication. So Environmental Action, for example, has an annual gathering. While this does not involve making decisions, it is used as a platform for discussions and sharing information: “it’s partly action training, it’s partly people presenting certain topics of interest like hunting or shale gas or climate issues or whatever people are basically proposing as campaigns” (Environmental Action activist).

While Environmental Action explicitly avoids making decisions at annual meetings, other groups like the Syndicalist Union or the Local Anarchist Group do make decisions on such occasions and do so with a view to achieving consensus on specific issues. In this case, the role of many-to-many communication is not limited to sharing information or having open-ended discussions, but includes ensuring that everyone involved in the group has a voice and can participate in the decision-making procedures (in line with the radical democratic principles associated with contemporary anarchist and radical-left movements). One issue that was highlighted by several activists was the continuing role of one-to-one internal communication. One Local Anarchist Group activist, for example, spoke of the importance of this informal, interpersonal communication in a way that reflects the debate over the relative value of strong and weak ties in social movements (see Gladwell 2010 on this distinction).

In terms of networked technologies and many-to-many communication, a number of the activists who participated in this study described the use of e-mail networks as one of the key ways in which group members communicate with one another. Fight Racism Now, for example, makes use of an internal discussion list, as does Environmental Action.
The Syndicalist Union activist who participated in this study attributed that group’s reluctance to use a listserv (apart from the ‘one-to-many manner’ distribution of information) to the common complaint about online communication: that it too quickly descends into arguments and behaviour that would very rarely occur in offline communication.

The Community Alliance is one group which has made an online forum central to their internal communication practice, as “an important means of staying constantly in contact with one another and to deepen political discussions” (Community Alliance activist). In these ways, the networking technologies developed over the last two decades, namely e-mail networks and forums (see Lievrouw 2011) do play important roles for the many-to-many internal communication of those groups on the radical left: as with general meetings, these tools are used in order to reinforce their democratic character. While none of the radical-left groups involved in this study use newer social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter for their internal communication, one group, the Local Anarchist Group, does use a platform similar to Facebook as a central part of its internal communication practice: a system known as Crabgrass.

**CRABGRASS**

Developed by Riseup, a collective of web developers that provides (primarily for activists) free private e-mail accounts and listserv, Crabgrass is designed as a platform that aims to include everything groups need to organise online. As its website states, this comes down to “social networking, group collaboration and network organizing” (Crabgrass n.d.). It goes on to elaborate:

> By social networking, we mean the ability of users to get to know one another through their online contributions and presence. By group collaboration, we mean the ability of small groups to get things done, such as share files, track tasks and projects, make decisions and build repositories of shared knowledge. By network organizing, we mean the ability of multiple groups to work together on projects in a democratic manner (Crabgrass n.d.).

Given the rise in the use of online tools and platforms in grassroots organising, Crabgrass attempts to fill the vacuum left by the dominance of corporate social media by providing a free piece of software that allows a single user profile to interact with different groups and projects. Crabgrass works much in the same way as other social media platforms like Facebook, with a range of functions that allow groups to share information, create events, make decisions and network with other groups.

Tad Hirsch highlights the fact that the organisational structures of Crabgrass’ networks “arise from a fundamental rethinking of the model of social relations that undergirds social media design” (Hirsch 2011,
While Facebook, for example, focuses on what he terms “personal social networking” that privileges “lightweight connections between individuals”, Crabgrass utilises “collective social networking” (Hirsch 2011, 141). Hirsch further notes that Crabgrass starts “from the premise that activist networks are centred on collectives rather than individuals”, so that “the designers have developed a nested model of social organization that recognizes hierarchy and supports several kinds of relationships between individuals and groups” (Hirsch 2011, 141).

Despite the use of facilities like Crabgrass and e-mail networks, one-to-many communication still plays a role in organisations that pride themselves on being radically democratic and focussed on consensus decision making and an open sharing of information. This picture holds true when online or technologically mediated communication is included in the analysis. A good example of this is the Socialist Alternative, which tries to move members towards more many-to-many communication practices like forum and listserv use. One Socialist Alternative member described the situation as follows:

What we’re trying to do, not always successfully, is to stimulate people to send in reports about what they’re doing and what’s happening to our internal members-only site, so that it reaches everybody and so that we have a record of what’s happening (Socialist Alternative activist).

While the Socialist Alternative is trying to integrate many-to-many communication into their internal practices, the habits of members in relying on one-to-one, which still plays an important role in the group, have hampered this process. In this respect—and this goes for other groups involved in this study as well—the key piece of technology for these one-to-one communication practices is mobile phones, with activists making use of voice calls and SMS texting.

When looking at more traditionally organised radical-left groups, such as the Socialist Workers International, the picture is of a much more typical, one-to-many approach. While the Socialist Workers International does hold a party congress each year, much of the political decision making is done by the central committee along the lines of democratic centralism (Cliff 1968). While the organisation undoubtedly includes many-to-many discussions as well as more informal one-to-one exchanges, it is crucial to note that the stated organisation form and communication structure is one of a top-down, one-to-many nature.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

Moving on to examine the external communication practices, the question becomes one of describing the relationships between, on the one
hand, the activists in the group and, on the other, members of the public who operate outside it. While external communication is one area where many of the radical left groups involved in this study have included social media like Facebook and Twitter, little of this follows the many-to-many practices that the 2011 uprisings revealed as being viable. Fight Racism Now, for example, was quick to take up social media and even had a MySpace account before platforms like Facebook and Twitter came on the scene (MySpace was launched in 2003 and was overtaken by Facebook as the most popular social network in 2008). However, Fight Racism Now used MySpace for one-to-many communication and actually discouraged people from becoming ‘friends’ with them, as this could single that person out as a target for the extreme right.

While, therefore, the local and working groups within organisations like Fight Racism Now, the Syndicalist Union and Environmental Action do use Facebook and Twitter, this is employed almost exclusively for one-to-many communication. Justifying their choice, activists cited reasons such as the tendency (mentioned above) of online discussions to degenerate into arguments and the difficulty of having intelligent debates on something like Twitter, where each person can only use 140 characters per tweet. Most of the use of social media and networking technologies for external communication comes in the form of groups sharing information and articles from their own websites with their followers on networking platforms. The Local Anarchist Group also uses Facebook to promote events they organise, but they do not actively check their account or respond to comments.

A typical example of how the radical left uses social media is the Socialist Alternative. One Socialist Alternative activist involved in this study spoke in a way which could apply to many radical left groups, declaring that “what we basically did was, we have a paper journal, and first we had a website to help expand the readership of this paper journal, and now this also includes a Facebook page” (Socialist Alternative activist). So, in common with similar groups, Socialist Alternative’s approach has been limited to a one-to-many model of communication with articles written for their online journal being shared on Facebook. The case of the Socialist Alternative is interesting, as one activist I spoke to talked about how they have tried to use their website and Facebook page more as a many-to-many communication tool, engaging readers in debate and responding to feedback and comments, but that they have not seen the levels of engagement from the audience required for such a practice:

It’s still very much one-way communication of writers to an audience, even though in principle we’d like to have more of the character of a conversation. . . . If there would be more of a conversation and more of a response, we would definitely want to stimulate that and we reply to whatever feedback we get, but there’s just not that much feedback (Socialist Alternative activist).
This Socialist Alternative activist went on to say, “For a long time we had a website on which it was possible for people to reply to articles on the website, and that was a choice we made because we wanted to encourage people to respond and discuss” (Socialist Alternative activist). This attempt at engaging their audience in many-to-many communication has, however, never been realised.

Two of the radical-left groups involved in this study have managed to engage those outside the group in many-to-many communication. The first of these is the Community Alliance, an undefined radical-left group. Externally, the Community Alliance’s communication practices look similar to those of other radical-left collectives in that they have a blog-type website and Facebook and Twitter accounts, yet they also use Google+ (the only radical-left group involved in the study to use this platform). They also use an announcements listserv through which they share the articles posted on the website.

Where the Community Alliance differs is in the way in which they use both the website and their Facebook page as platforms for discussions around the topics of the articles posted there, with Community Action activists responding to comments and reactions on social media. What the Community Alliance does with social media is more or less what the Socialist Alternative has been trying to do without the same level of success: using social media technologies as a part of many-to-many communication strategies. That these technologies form only a part of the overall external communication practice was something stressed by another of the Community Alliance activists, who made the point that a mix of methods and tools is needed in engaging with those outside the group.

The second group on the radical left that makes use of networking technologies in an innovative way is Environmental Action, an explicitly anarchist collective. While Environmental Action uses Facebook, Twitter and their own website in much the same one-to-many way as other groups, their use of crowd-sourcing techniques in an anti-hunting campaign they initiated provides a very interesting example of many-to-many communication in practice.

CROWD-SOURCED MAPPING

One of the ways in which Environmental Action opposes hunting, in this case in a large forest, is by creating an online map of hunting cabins and related objects and locations (including animal feeding sites and watering holes). The map (currently being updated to allow automatic updating of locations) has had over a thousand submissions from various sources, including activists and members of the public, who can e-mail information to the organisation. As well as providing the evidence required to counter the statements from hunting organisations, the map is also in-
tended to provide the informational resources required by those involved in the “campaign for non-violent direct action to stop the hunting of boar and deer” (Environmental Action, anonymised website). The map also includes the details of hunting cabins and lookout nests that have been sabotaged.

Crowd-sourced mapping has become a staple of social media–backed activism and was famously used during Kenya’s 2007 presidential election, where the site Ushahidi.com allowed users to upload information about post-election violence and provided testimony about incidents that were ignored by the mainstream media (Hirsch 2011, 137–38). Crowd-sourced mapping, like the type used by Environmental Action, also, inevitably, entails some problems. First, by creating an information resource for radical activism which includes potential targets of direct action, it also provides a resource for the authorities trying to prevent exactly those actions. Using publically accessible crowd-sourced maps could endanger not only those providing the information that creates the map, but also those using the map in their activism. Secondly, there is the problem of verification. While maps like that hosted by Environmental Action do provide an opportunity for horizontal sharing of information, in situations where that information needs to be verified before being mapped, the role of a mediating body could be an issue. This is not necessarily to ensure the effectiveness of such a project, but certainly in order to maintain its non-hierarchical nature. A third problem could be the inclusion of false data to throw activists off the scent, to use an apt metaphor.

CONCLUSIONS

Table 5.1 summarises the findings of this chapter, along with categorisation of the groups as either hierarchical or non-hierarchical.

In discussing these findings, I want to repeat the suggestion, introduced above, that there should be a certain level of congruity between the organisational structure and stated political principles of a group, on the one hand, and the nature of that group’s communication practices, on the other. In other words, a group with, for example, a stated commitment to non-hierarchical organisational principles should engage largely in non-hierarchical communication practices. This perhaps applies only to those groups inspired by the alter-globalisation movement and anarchist politics, given the commitment existing in many such organisations (and in much of this type of activism in general) to prefiguration. Prefiguration can be defined as “trying to make the processes we use to achieve our immediate goals and embodiment of our ultimate goals, so that there is no distinction between how we fight and what we fight for” (Maecckelbergh 2009, 66). While this need not always be the guiding principle of anarchist activism (see Franks 2012), in normal circumstances it
Table 5.1. Organisational Structure and Nature of Communication Practices of Radical-Left Groups

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<th>Organisational Structure</th>
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<td>The Socialist Workers</td>
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should be. What one would expect to see then would be an attempt by anarchist groups and others committed to non-hierarchical organisation, to embody these principles in their communication practices. For Marxist and other groups not influenced by the alter-globalisation movement in the same way, their commitment to centralised organisation may nonetheless be mirrored in their practices, which might be expected to take an altogether more instrumental form.

Of the groups involved in this study and discussed in this chapter, two are explicitly Marxist (the Socialist Workers International and the Socialist Alternative), three are explicitly anarchist (the Local Anarchist Group, the Syndicalist Union and Environmental Action) and two are not defined as Marxist or anarchist but as radical and left-wing (the Community Alliance and Fight Racism Now). All the anarchist groups and undefined radical-left groups expressed a commitment to non-hierarchical organisation, as did, perhaps surprisingly, the Trotskyist Socialist Alternative. The Socialist Workers International, also Trotskyist, is the only large group on the radical left in this context which operates according to a traditional party-like structure with a centralised hierarchy.

While all of the anarchist and undefined groups engage in many-to-many communication internally (I characterise many-to-many as being,
at least potentially, non-hierarchical, whereas one-to-many would be necessarily hierarchical), only Environmental Action and the Community Alliance engage in many-to-many external communication. In this respect, only Environmental Action and the Community Alliance can be considered as acting, at least partially, in a prefigurative and non-hierarchical manner, in the sense that their stated commitment to non-hierarchical politics is embodied in their internal and external communication practices. The Local Anarchist Group, Fight Racism Now and the Syndicalist Union all engage in more traditional one-to-many communication externally. The Socialist Alternative has made concerted attempts at initiating many-to-many communication practices both internally and externally, but these have come up against a lack of uptake amongst activists as well as the group’s ‘audience’. The Socialist Workers International can be seen as being consistent with a more traditional approach to Marxist organisation in that it is organised hierarchically and engages in one-to-many communication practices both internally and externally.

In this chapter I have highlighted the nature of the internal and external communication practices of the radical-left groups involved in this study. In doing so, I have provided a discussion of the development of the concept of many-to-many communication. This concept, defined as “communication that takes place in networks where everyone participating is able to send and receive information to and from everyone else in the network” (Jensen and Helles 2011, 520), has been related to recent developments in communication technologies. In this regard, the social networking platforms used by the Local Anarchist Group (Crabgrass) and Environmental Action (crowd-sourced mapping) are important and I have included extended discussion of these examples.

The aim of the chapter has been to determine whether anarchist, Marxist and less strictly defined radical-left groups are consistent in their engagement in communication practices, and whether these practices, both internal and external, embody the stated principles of the groups in terms of hierarchical and non-hierarchical organising. In concluding, I would note that only Environmental Action and the Community Alliance, among the supposedly non-hierarchical groups, are fully consistent in terms of their internal and external communication practices. The Socialist Workers International is similarly consistent but in relation to a more hierarchical party structure.

NOTES

1. A Google scholar search for the phrase ‘many-to-many communication’ (conducted on 19 February 2014) returned 3 results published between 1950 and 1959; 42 between 1960 and 1969; 170 between 1970 and 1979; 796 between 1980 and 1989; 4,920 between 1990 and 1999; 17,100 between 2000 and 2009 and already 14,400 between 2010 and 2014. While this exercise cannot be considered conclusive, it does highlight
the dramatic increase in the appearance of the phrase in academic literature between the 1950s and today.

2. See Robert Paul Wolff’s *In Defence of Anarchism* (1970), which discusses the potential of the type of direct, telecommunications-backed democracy.

3. Other important contributions to this conception of networked communication include Jodi Dean (2005) and Nick Dyer-Witherford (1999).

4. In other words, a mode of operation that does not operate underground, as do direct action groups like the Animal Liberation Front or groups in countries that have especially authoritarian governments.

5. The names of the participants and the location of the research will not be included and the names of groups have been altered for reasons of confidentiality and research ethics.

6. This and the issue of ‘noise’ (i.e., the overabundance of information) are problems commonly attributed to many-to-many technologies like social media.

7. This is a very simplified account of prefiguration: for fuller discussions see Franks 2003; Maeckelbergh 2011; van de Sande 2013, 230-3; Yates 2014.

REFERENCES


Community Alliance activist, interview with Thomas Swann, 4 October 2013.


