Trust in Electronically-Supported Networks of Political Activists

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ABSTRACT

This position paper is based on experiences and insights gathered in several long-term studies of the ICT usage of political activists and civil society networks. These studies include the introduction of a community system for Iranian NGOs, (participant) observation of the European Social Forum (and its respective organization committees), and interviews with Palestine activists fighting against Israeli occupation, using social media platforms. The position paper is mainly interested in the particular need for trust of political activists, who quite often are endangered by political conflicts, disrupted environments and instable situations, investigation by authorities, imprisonment etc.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Since the early 2000er Years the author and colleagues are investigating into appropriation and use of ICTs by civil society organizations and political activists. Following an approach of "Socio-Informatics" (Rohde/Wulf 2011), these research projects aimed at a profound understanding of political activists' practice, their appropriation and use of ICTs and recommendations for better technological support.

Methodologically, the mentioned projects relied mainly on qualitative, explorative methods (observations, interviews, workshops), partially integrating ethnographic methods (like participant observations), and – in cases of long-term projects with a design focus – combine various measures according to the approaches on "Integrated Organization and Technology Development" (OTD, Rohde 2011) and on "Design Case Studies" (DCS, Wulf et al. 2011).

According the broader research focus of these projects, they were not mainly dealing with ICT support of teams but of networks of social and political activists (and civil society organizations, CSOs). Nevertheless, within these networks you could find smaller teams and working groups, operating particular projects and specific tasks (for a comparative discussion on teams, networks, communities etc. see Rohde/Shaffer 2003).

Furthermore, the investigated activist and CSO networks represent "virtual organizations", mainly defined by absence of traditional organization structures and formal principles, existing transboundary organizational structures, high fluidity and instability, timely and spatial distribution, and networked ICTs as an essential precondition (cf. Rohde 2007, p. 38) - or "hybrid organizations", that (partially) communicate and practice both in real/physical meetings and virtual online-sessions (cf. Rohde et al. 2004).

Following table offers an overview on the investigated activist networks, the main research objectives and applied methods.

Project/Activists	Iranian NGOs	ESF members and organizers – European CSOs	Palestinian activists fighting the Israeli wall
Years	2001-2003-	2006-2011	2010-ongoing
Main Objectives	Establishment of a Cooperation Platform for Iranian CSOs	Understanding and support for organizing and coordinating ESF events	Understanding communication practice and ICT use of Palestinian activists
Methods	OTD, DCS, observation, interviews, workshops, trainings, needs assessment, ICT introduction, questionnaire/ survey	Participant observation, interviews, analysis of appropriation and use of ICTs, (partially) DCS	Observation, interviews, Facebook analysis

Table 1: Overview projects and methods

EMPIRICAL INSIGHTS

In the following section some central empirical insights of three research projects are reported as far as they are relevant for the issue of trust in political activists' networks. While these long-term studies have been described somewhere else before in more detail (Rohde 2004, Saeed et al. 2010 and 2011, Wulf et al. 2013), this paper is based on a re-analysis of these studies with regard to trust matters.

Trust-Building needs time

Concerning the networking of Iranian NGOs, a (around one Year duration) project was conducted which aimed at the support of community-building and technical networking. This networking project took place in 2001 to 2003.

With respect to the theoretical presumptions and the main project objectives (regarding the establishment of Social Capital and Communities of Practice), one central insight is the following: Both processes – trust-building and social identification with a shared enterprise and common practice – need more time than one year to show results, especially in risky and unstable situations. It can be expected that social trust and common practice need a longer period of shared experiences to establish stable relationships. Furthermore, the measurement of effects of social processes is a methodological problem: Which criteria should be measured to evaluate social capital, trust or social practice? An appropriate evaluation of trust, social capital, and identification with a common practice therefore should integrate qualitative and quantitative methods investigating communication and cooperation over a longer period.

In this first case study (Rohde 2004) the networking and community-building measures (trainings and workshops) have been evaluated as valuable events fostering the social capital within the community. Furthermore, the individual ratings of the measures in the questionnaires have been very positive. Both results could be due to the attraction which foreign experts might have for Iranians which had been isolated internationally for a long time (and unfortunately are again since 2005). Additionally, a free computer system which was introduced and the provided computer trainings might have caused positive ratings. Especially for NGO practitioners who are volunteering in civil society activities, these offers and trainings mean a personal benefit.

Last but not least, the establishment of a common practice, the negotiation of meaning, social identification and the building of trust and social capital are not processes which can be manipulated directly by treatments in trainings. The successful establishment of social capital and communities of practice are based mainly on (personal and collective) experiences, shared history, and common activities. Thus, the presented project could provide only a socio-technical infrastructure to enable these social processes and create supporting conditions.

Concerning the processes of community-building and establishing a common cooperative culture and a shared practice, we hoped that socio-organizational interventions will show middle- and long-term effects. The development of a vital civil society in Iran was planned to play an important role in democratic transition. Unfortunately, our project came to an end when the political situation in Iran and the region changed (conservative majority in the Iranian Parliament, Iraq War, "Axis of Evil" rhetoric) and could not be continued.

Visibility and openness as preconditions for trust-building

A second project (running from 2006 to 2011) aimed to support political activists' networks to organize biannual gatherings, called the European Social Forum (ESF).

Social movements and civil society organizations (CSOs) have recently gained special attention from CSCW researchers; studying their cooperation is interesting due to limited resources, diverse organizational forms and volunteer workforce. Information management, technology sustainability, and inter/intra organizational collaboration are major challenges in these settings. We took these studies a step further and looked at how coordination happens when multiple collaborative tasks (like political agenda setting, inter-organizational coordination, fundraising and public mobilization) converge into multi-cultural and heterogeneous political environments (Saeed et al. 2010 and 2011).

Agenda setting is one of the main activities in preparing for the ESF events. Activists in this heterogeneous network, working in different application areas, on different regional and political issues, with different political ideologies are involved in this process. It is vital to have transparency in the procedure to create trust among the stakeholders. This was an important point, especially in preparation for ESF 2008, when the proposed number of activities was quite large so that many activity suggestions had to be merged together in fewer (common, cooperative, merged) activities. Some activists' concerns regarding this merging process could be better dealt with by a highly-transparent merging process. Unfortunately, this was not the case. The lack of information to the people who were not present in the preparatory meetings makes the process look suspicious (cf. Saeed et al. 2010). If there was a kind of visualization which highlights the relationship between the proposed activities and the finally merged activity, activists could better understand how the whole process happened.

While ESF attracts actors from the anti-globalization movement, our findings indicate a certain lack in wider participation. The selection of the main themes of ESF 2008 was open to participation since everyone could make suggestions via the world wide web. In case of ESF 2010 only people present at the physical meetings in Turkey were able to have their say in the initial proposals. Furthermore, the draft writing procedure for the manifestos was quite closed, since initially only selected activists knew who could contribute in writing the sample text. Web-based tools have the potential to make these processes more transparent and include more actors. A representation of the writing process in the program and a wiki functionality on the website could have enabled much wider participation. However, the appropriation of such tools could have an important, though maybe undesired by some, impact on the outcoming manifestos. Anyway, process transparency and opportunity for participation would have prevented heated discussion in the thematic subassemblies and the final

plenum. ICT infrastructures play an important role in preparing for the ESF gatherings. They allow for meta-coordination, mobilization and information dissemination around ESF events. They have, moreover, the potential to make internal decision processes more transparent and democratically legitimized. Whether these potentials will turn out finally depends on the pattern of appropriation within the heterogeneous network of political actors. Our investigation indicates lacking technical capabilities combined with bad documentation of the code and missing tailorability are serious obstacles in appropriation work.

Most of the above mentioned problems with regard to visibility, transparence, participation, and openness are very closely related to matters of trust and trust-building between very heterogeneous activists and organization committees. During the project we derived some design requirements and first prototypes for supporting this crucial task of trust-building amongst activists' networks (Saeed et al. 2011).

Our study focused on a better understanding of activists' practices and appropriate design requirements for technological support. Other fora working at different geographical levels could benefit from these findings when elaborating on their ICT strategy. Furthermore, our ethnographic study highlights some design scenarios which could improve and facilitate the work practices of this civil society network.

Following our design case studies approach (Wulf et al. 2011), the presented ethnographic analysis of the ESF community marks a starting point for developing an appropriate support for this particular transnational CSO network.

Mixing private and professional/political information to create trust

In our project with Palestine demonstrators against the Israeli occupation (starting in 2010), we specifically looked at a political conflict which has impacted and continues to impact the Middle East geo-political environment. Our research entails a detailed examination of the work of political activists in a Palestinian village, and, more specifically, how internet and social media applications were appropriated in this struggle (Wulf et al. 2013).

Investigating the social practices and media use of political activists in this context is a challenge in more than one respect. There are evident material and political constraints in such situations. Undoubtedly confidence-building is very important in such a context. Local actors may take risks when reporting on their political activities; also researchers might have to take certain risks. Building trust is a central issue under these circumstances. In our case it was facilitated by personal recommendations and a long-term engagement with the political activists.

Since the beginning in the late 1990s, where Palestinian people started to „tell the world their story", some of their work let to a sophisticated „all new-media activism". Websites like Google, YouTube, Twitter or Facebook became very popular during the last years. But Palestinian activists and their supporters are faced with a new generation of censorship in this field: a Facebook page called „Third Palestinian Intifada" has been removed upon request from the Israeli government, at a similar request Apple removed the App „Third Palestinian Intifada" from its App Store.

The weekly demonstrations against the Israeli wall are the most important element of the village's political resistance. The West Bank village Al Ma'sara is a rural village with an only very slowly developing telecommunication infrastructure. However, even before the Internet was made accessible in the village, one activist had already started to appropriate Email and Facebook (he could access from his work office) for his political activities.

On the laptop in the community space he showed us a large collection of photos and videos representing different demonstrations and protest marches that had taken place in recent years. Other photos and videos documenting their protests were still stored on his smart phone. It was obvious, that the availability of mobile devices and a laptop screen have offered additional opportunities to ground and structure his narratives. Furthermore, he presented his Facebook account linking different groups of mainly Israeli supporters. When looking at the Facebook postings of the activists from Al Ma'sara, it is striking that their personal pages are an assemblage of materials dealing with a variety of issues such as politics, private life, music, film, and religion.

In our study we focus on the way in which demonstrations are organized and the new media progressively got adopted for support. Our empirical data describes a growing role social media play in: (1) stimulating the participation in the weekly demonstrations under the conditions of military occupation, (2) interacting regularly with a network of Israeli supporters, (3) keeping a much looser network of international activists informed about the demonstrations, (4) offering information to the broader public.

One central finding of our study is, that the structure of Facebook pages indicates that there is a very particular sense here in which 'the personal is the political' (cf. Wulf et al. 2013). Local activists make few if any attempts to distinguish their personal and family lives from their political work. Interestingly, the appropriation of Facebook as a political platform allows them to link private life to political activities in a new manner. The personal, as it were, is newly political. Further, we should not discount the importance of the face-to-face nature of many political activities. Obviously a demonstration requires the physical presence of the political activists. The routines involved in preparing for the demonstration in activists' homes build personal relationships as much as they prepare for the activities which follow.

Moreover, the personal is the political here in another sense, because online activity may have very real consequences for participants. There is growing awareness of the possibility of monitoring and the consequent privacy issues. We observed that the social media practices of activists were sometimes perceived as problematic by their (arguably more sophisticated) supporters. Specifically the posting of photos on Facebook pages and the usage of open mailing lists were perceived as problematic by some of the participants in the demonstration. In general, international participants display greater anxiety and are highly conscious of the consequences there might be for them, for instance, at border crossing points. An important feature of this is that online functionalities are not simply adopted but have to be learned. In the absence of a dense population of users and a reluctance of foreign supporters to express critic towards local activists of whom they know risk much more than them, this can be a slow process.

Our findings brought evidence as well for certain design requirements regarding privacy issues, access rights and authentification mechanisms etc. as for 'enrich' political information with personal/private context and to create opportunities for direct physical interaction to establish and foster trust amongst political activists.

DISCUSSION

The position paper sums up some findings from three research projects dealing with the ICT appropriation and use of political activist and civil society networks. The investigated networks represent virtual (or hybrid) structures that heavily depend on networked ICTs for the organization and coordination of their activities.

Three main empirical insights with regard to trust in these activist networks have been reported:

(1) Trust-building needs time. Research and development projects focusing on trust-building in virtual networks have to take this timely constraint into account. Furthermore, effects of trust-building activities or -supporting technologies are not likely to show very soon and are not easy to observe or measure (systematically and methodologically).

(2) Visibility and openness are critical preconditions for trust-building amongst (very loosely-coupled) activists within often quite heterogeneous networks. As well decision-making and processes of coordination/organization as an appropriate design of supporting ICTs have to meet these requirements for visibility and openness, especially in instable, informal and non-standardized organizational contexts.

(3) Mixing private and professional information helps to establish personal trust between activists. Opportunities for personal and private framing of professional (in our case: political) information allows for gaining credibility, reliability and accountability of communication in virtual networks.

Last but not least, in our context of political activist who quite often are engaging in conflicts and are endangered by political authorities, oppression and/or official investigation, confidence-building and trustful relations are a central precondition for research in these networks, as well. Without being considered as trustworthy, scientific researchers would not get access to these virtual networks and their practice at all. Insofar, trust-building in this context is relevant both as a means and an end.

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SHORT BIO

Markus Rohde, Ph.D. in IS, studied psychology and sociology and is one of the founders of the International Institute for Socio-Informatics (IISI) and co-editor of the International Report on Socio-Informatics. He is research manager for Community Informatics at the Institute for Information Systems and New Media at the University of Siegen. Moreover, he is editor of the political science journal "Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen" (Social Movements). Since 1991 his research focuses on usability engineering of network systems, on virtual organizations, and on "organization and technology development". .