

Hunting Protestors: Mobilisation, Participation, and Protest Online in the Countryside Alliance

**Wainer Lusoli and Stephen Ward
European Studies Research Institute
University of Salford
Salford M5 4WT
Email:w.lusoli@salford.ac.uk**

**Paper for presentation at the ECPR Joint Sessions, University of
Edinburgh, 28 March-2 April 2003.**

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been considerable interest in the apparent upsurge of protest activity, especially as traditional representative organisations (parties and trade unions) appear to be in decline in many liberal democracies. A number of accounts have highlighted the importance of the Internet and other new media in the mobilisation of several mass protests and in the activity of campaigning organisations generally [Cisler, 1999; Jordan 2000; Scott and Street, 2000].¹ There has been considerable speculation as to whether new ICTs can provide a catalyst for political participation and a more active citizenry and, if so, what types of political organisation are likely to benefit [Diani, 2000; Bimber 1998]. However, whilst there has been a growing amount of evidence examining political organisations' online strategies from a top-down perspective, there has been little evidence emerging from the grassroots about the role of ICTs in participation. This paper attempts to fill some of this empirical gap, through a survey of members of the Countryside Alliance (CA) in the UK. The CA has come to prominence over the past six years in opposing government proposals to ban hunting with dogs, most notably with its large 'Liberty and Livelihood' Protest March in London in September 2002. Whilst the CA have a reputation of representing an ageing, conservative, rural, middle-class membership, unpromising ground for ICT campaigning, the organisation has devoted considerable resources to use ICTs for mobilisation purposes. Consequently, the survey examines, the profile of members online, the use of the Internet and the attitudes of members towards new ICTs and participation. In short, it assesses what difference ICTs make in the context of CA participation and activism. The paper begins by discussing participatory potential and organisational consequences of ICTs, the development of the CA and its online campaigning, before reporting the research methods and survey results, and finally assessing the wider significance of the study.

Mobilisation, Participation and Protest Online: Possibilities and Pitfalls

The value, (or otherwise), of ICTs for organisations in terms of mobilisation and participation can be seen in two areas: (1) widening participation through the inclusion of greater number and diversity of citizens into the participatory process; (2) deepening or extending the range and efficacy of participatory activity.

Widening participation?

At one level, the Internet can be used by organisations for recruitment purposes to increase and maintain membership numbers. From a rational choice perspective, arguably, the Internet lowers the barriers (costs) to participation for individuals from more marginal and excluded groups. Political activity such as information gathering, joining organisations or directly contacting political institutions and organisations could become far easier and quicker [Bonchek, 1995]. The arrival of set-top boxes and Internet TV could allow the housebound, such as the elderly, single parents and the disabled, to participate more easily from their homes. ICTs could also be employed to recruit new members from sections of the community that are less attracted through traditional media, and less likely to join political organisations, such as younger voters who have wider access via educational establishments [Coleman, 2001; Gibson et al, 2002; Lupia and Philpot, 2002]. In contrast to this positive outlook, some have suggested that the Internet unlikely to make much difference and may indeed widen participation gaps [Norris, 1999, 2001; Katz, & Rice, 2002]. Firstly, because access to the technology is still restricted. The digital divide means that the poor and elderly, in particular, lack the resources and skills to use the technology and often these are the very people who already disengaged from the political process. Thus the Internet may simply provide additional resources for those already participating. Secondly, although the technology may provide the means to engage with political organisations and institutions, it does not provide the motivation to do so. Without wider reforms in the political system, the technology alone is unlikely to make people more interested in politics or engage with political organisations.

Deepening participation?

Aside from simply increasing the number of participants, it has been suggested that the Internet could extend participatory activity and also deepen the quality of the participatory experience [Ward *et al.*, 2003; Rheingold, 2002]. At one level, the speed and convenience of ICTs may encourage participants to supplement and extend their range of participatory experiences. Moreover, the interactivity of the Internet, in the form of email, discussion fora and live chatrooms provide the public with a range of additional channels to voice their opinions on issues. In theory, ICTs make possible to participate 24 hours a day, seven days week, 52 weeks of the year [Washbourne, 1999]. The Internet also provides greater possibilities for organisational members to network both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, (member-to-elite), it is now easier for individual members to advance their views directly to organisational elites via electronic means. Political organisations can put large amounts of policy information/documents online and encourage feedback directly from members, supporters and the wider public. Similarly, leading figures from political organisations can now engage in online debate and question sessions with members much more directly than through traditional media. Horizontally, (member-to-member), it has been suggested that the net can further online community building or networking and increase member to member contacts via email lists, discussion groups and hyperlinks on websites. Studies of traditional forms of participation all indicate the importance of regular contact with an organisation for maintaining members' interest and rates of participation. Theoretically, this should be easier via application of ICTs. It is not simply a matter of extending the amount and type of participation available but the interactivity, speed and networking potential of ICT participation could actually enhance the quality of participatory experiences.

Pessimists, however, are sceptical of the ability of electronic forms of participation to deepen participation activities or produce meaningful political deliberation. Firstly, they question whether ICTs can really foster networking and community building online, arguing that most ICT communication is a relatively passive and solitary experience which is unlikely to link participants together and develop collective ties. Face-to-face networking, Diani suggested, are far more effective in generating activism and increased levels of social capital [2000]. Secondly, critics contend that the individualistic push button mode of participation will actually render participation less meaningful and erode citizen interest, making collective action harder and elites less accountable [Lipow and Seyd, 1996; Barber, 1997; Street, 1997]. Participation through electronic referenda and the like may become no more than the registering individual preferences [McLean, 1989]. Whilst citizens may have access to large amounts of information online, they may either become overloaded and switch off, or avoid it and insulate themselves from alternative opinions by only selecting a narrow range of online information sources [Shapiro, 1999; Sunstein, 2001].

The Rise of Rural Protest and the Development of the Countryside Alliance

The Growth of the Countryside Alliance

Over the past decade or so, a number of countries have witnessed the rise of protest groups and movements focused around rural issues and a rural agenda [Woods, 2003a and 2003b]. Prominent amongst these organisations, in the UK, has been the growth of the Countryside Alliance. Whilst it is relative a newcomer to protest politics (1997), the CA has well established roots, having been formed from an amalgamation of three established pressure groups – the British Field Sports Society, the Countryside Movement and the Countryside Business Group. The initial catalyst for its formation was the likely arrival of a new Labour administration promising a ban on hunting with hounds. Although it has subsequently added a broader range of rural issues to its agenda, critics argue that these are largely a veneer and that the CA is still primarily a pro-hunting organisation with only an opportunistic interest in other rural issues.² Yet, whilst hunting is clearly at the core of the Alliance's agenda, many involved in its

formation and early direction saw the need for the CA to represent a broader agenda [Woods, 1998]. Arguably, much of the success of the CA has been its ability to act as a focal point for a range of sometimes-contradictory rural issues. Certainly, the CA has been sustained by a variety of crises and emerging issues, over the past six years, that have provided ammunition in its fight with the Labour Government. These have included: an ongoing crisis in the agricultural sector most notably highlighted by the foot and mouth epidemic in 2001; the fuel protests in autumn 2001 campaigning against increasing government petrol duties which have a disproportionate impact on the more car reliant rural public; the government proposals for increasing access to the countryside through its 'right to roam' legislation; apparent reductions in a range of rural public services, notably proposals to close rural post offices. Hence, though the pro-hunting cause is by far away the most prominent issue, the CA have tapped into and encouraged the perception of a growing urban-rural divide in the UK. The CA has consistently argued that rural issues and countryside pursuits have been misunderstood and discriminated against by an essentially urban political class. Richard Burge, the CA's Chief Executive, encapsulated this view when interviewed about the purpose of the Liberty and Livelihood march:

It is about country mindedness, and country minded people who feel disenfranchised by the system. They feel ignored and that their life and work is something that urban based politicians want to do things to, rather than things for. They feel like a colony in their own nation and do not feel like an equal participant. They have realised that economically they are insignificant but they are not prepared to accept that they are politically unimportant.

In terms of the basic demography, there are 659 seats in the Commons, of which 80 have more than 25 per cent of their constituents living in rural parishes. The protestors believe strongly that government is there for everyone. It is not just there for the people which elected it, or for the people who might elect it in the future. They feel disenfranchised, and have a great deal of anxiety. The march is about them demanding to be heard.³

It is noticeable also that the CA has drawn on anti-Labour feeling amongst traditionally conservative rural voters [Ward, 2002]. The CA has skilfully portrayed itself as representing traditional British (English) values and often equated rural values with a wider national (English/British) identity. In short, Woods [1998] characterises the CA approach as one of reactive ruralism:

The mobilisation of a self-defined traditional rural population in defence of purportedly historic, natural and agrarian-centred rural way of life in response to a perceived challenge from ill-informed urban intervention

Organisational and Member Profile

Organisationally, the CA is a mixture of a traditional pressure group and a social movement organisation. It is perhaps most akin to what Diani and Donati [1999: 17] describe as a professional protest organisation. One which combines professional activism, mobilisation of financial resources, but includes also confrontational tactics amongst its tactical options. The CA has a professional staff of around 100 including policy and campaigns staff, communications and press officials and regional directors, based mainly in offices in London and Worcestershire. Although membership income is important for the organisation, it is supported by considerable number of wealthy backers. The CA operates partial internal democracy with a regional and a county branch structure which can organise their own activities. Individual members elect the executive board by postal ballot and can also contribute to AGMs. In terms of its repertoire of action, it has combined traditional lobbying, research, petitions and letter writing campaigns, along with a series of national high profile marches and

rallies. Indeed, the CA is probably best known for the three large-scale London marches it has organised in 1997, 1998 and 2002. The most recent 'Liberty and Livelihood' demonstration was one of the biggest protest events ever seen in the UK. Such events have been important not only in attracting a considerable swathe of media coverage⁴ but also in symbolical terms, building the image of the CA as wider rural protest organisation. It is clear that the CA have drawn on the example of large environmental organisations such as Greenpeace and FoE, but also more radically on the activities of direct action protest networks [Woods, 2003a and 2003b]. The fuel protests, in particular, influenced some in the Countryside Alliance to advocate more radical direct action tactics (civil disobedience) especially in the event that anti-hunting legislation is passed [Doherty *et al*, 2003]. A number of small breakaway groups have been formed which are highly critical of the leadership, its supposedly moderate tactics and the attempts to widen focus of the organisation. These include Countryside Action Network and the Real CA both of which are much more oriented towards direct action and have a decentralised network structure.⁵

Thus far, there has been little statistical evidence on the socio-demographic or political profile of the CA membership or their participatory activities. The stereotypical picture portrayed by its opponents is of a wealthy, middle-aged/elderly, middle-class, conservative, obsessed by hunting, fishing and shooting [Norton, 2002]. The CA has countered this line by stressing that its membership goes far beyond the hunting fraternity and covers a wide range of social backgrounds from agricultural labourers to country landowners.⁶ The only limited evidence that exists comes in the form of three MORI surveys of participants in various countryside rallies and marches and these are not necessarily CA members. Nevertheless, all three surveys indicate a similar supporter base with a very high proportion of middle-class, relatively affluent, overwhelmingly Conservative voters particularly from southern England with hunting acting as the main stimulus for participation on the marches.⁷

Countryside Alliance and Online Campaigning⁸

Given the traditional membership profile of CA, there is a surprising degree of technological development within the organisation, and considerable investment in staff and resources.⁹ The nucleus of the organisation's communication infrastructure is the Rural Communication Network (RCN), which is located in rural Hagley. The RCN has recently moved to a larger, more modern estate, which reflects the growth in importance of communication within the organisation. The communication strategy of the CA has been increasingly decentralised, though co-ordinated centrally via the RNC, with more power given to regional directors to communicate with the media. The IT unit at the RNC is reported to benefit from extensive freedom of action within the organisation. In terms of organisational resources, there are currently three staff at the Countryside Alliance RCN working permanently in relation to the web. The CA website was first set up in May 1998, after transition from the former BFSS website (set up in 1995). A further re-structuring followed in 2001, where it moved from an ISP type of website to a more traditional corporate approach. An online joining facility has been added recently (August 2002). The changes were embedded in the more general CA strategy for the re-positioning of the organisation in the political spectrum. The CA operates with two main databases, one for the management of the e-mailing list, the second including data on membership, and e-mail contact details for a small minority of the membership (12 %). There is an ongoing attempt to consolidate the two databases into a single, functional unit. The grass e-route is the weekly electronic newsletter of the CA. Circulation is estimated at 250,000 as it is posted on around 500 websites (accurate at November 2002), and circulated via several, different mailing lists. In addition, 14 regional e-newsletters - with targeted local information - are distributed every fortnight. Membership of the mailing list is currently in the region of 35,000. The list grew from an average of 20,000 over 2002 to a peak of 40,000 in the run-up to the London march. The September, 22 2002 march in London created a considerable degree of public interest around the Countryside Alliance. The March was announced on April, 22

capitalising on the interest created the previous year by the foot-and-mouth epidemic. The consequences in terms traffic on the CA site were significant. Average number of monthly visitors increased from some 40,000 visits per month to 57,000 in August and 160,000 in September. A special march website was also set up roughly three months before the march to help co-ordinate the march activities. The site attracted some 120,000 visits over the time span of its existence. It further prompted the subsequent development of an 'activism' section on the CA main site, which allows members to get more involved with the organisation. In terms of resources, two additional staff were employed at the time of the March to manage the ad-hoc website and co-ordinate the online activities. Two special e-mails were sent out in the two weeks preceding the March, with details of small-scale action around the country. Overall, therefore, the CA seems to have invested considerable time and thought the development of an IT structure and as the CA web manager has stated they believe that 'the Internet has enabled us to reach out to a larger audience by providing a portal to our campaigns which is updated every day'.¹⁰

Research questions and methodology

In assessing the participatory potential of ICTs for the Countryside Alliance we undertook an online survey of its membership. The survey set out to explore and analyse the use of ICTs by CA members. Data was gathered in two main areas. The first area is descriptive and explorative, the second more hypothesis based. We first asked about the demographic composition and patterns of Internet use of the Countryside Alliance online membership, as compared to traditional CA members. Then, we investigated the political profile and the online political behaviours of different categories of CA supporters: off-liners, on-liners and site visitors who are not formally members. Finally, in reporting online connected-ness we wanted to understand whether ICTs *deepen* and *widen* membership participation? In short, four research questions are drawn from the debate on the changing nature of the organisation presented above, and addressed in the context of ICT use by the organisation's membership:

- Organisational reach: do ICTs widen CA organisation reach?
- Diverse membership: do ICTs expand the social characteristics of the membership?
- Increasing levels of activism: do ICTs increase members' organisational activism?
- Effective mobilisation: do ICTs favours mobilisation, and who is mobilised?

Methodology

Both a postal and an online survey were used to collect information about Countryside Alliance members' online behaviour and organisational participation and activism. Both were agreed with the Countryside Alliance webmaster and endorsed by the organisation. The questionnaire included twenty questions, plus seven additional demographics questions and was divided in four main sections: Internet use, off-line political behaviours and attitudes, Internet political use and Internet use for organisational activities.¹¹ The online and postal questionnaires were identical, except that the online version made a (positive) assumption about the respondents' use of the Internet. The postal questionnaire was sent to 1969 randomly selected members. To ensure representativeness, the sample was geographically stratified across the 17 administrative regions of Countryside Alliance. The questionnaire and a cover letter from the CA, were sent out on 6 December 2003. Two weeks after the closing date (20 December) the response rate for the postal survey was 21.3 %.

The online survey was administered online using a simple HTML questionnaire, PHP form scripts and a javascript verification mechanism. The script covered the first question on internet use and all demographic variables. The questionnaire was active for three weeks, from 13 December 2002 to 6 January 2003. Procedurally, a 'cover' email was sent by the Countryside

Alliance to the subscribers to the grass e-route mailing list, which included a link to the online questionnaire. 38,000 readers were on the list at the time of the mailing. Additionally, the cover e-mail was posted on the homepage of the CA website (on 13 December). The composite mode of administration generated 1047 submissions, 588 from the e-mail and 397 from the website. The submissions were screened for genuine duplicates by cross-examining IP, Host and date-time stamp (submission of questionnaire) and a battery of 10 randomly selected variables. After the screening, eventually, 1476 unique questionnaires from both postal and online survey were processed and analysed using SPSS.

Unless otherwise specified, results presented below are based on the postal survey (valid N = 411). Where online results are reported, these refer to members only rather than all respondents, which also include supporters and generic site visitors. In general, the surveys returned similar results as to SES (except for age), and general political orientations. The two methods of sampling and administration seem to reduce the self-selection bias as to age, education and occupation. Though the online survey slightly over-samples respondents from higher income levels, overall the results from the two surveys are very similar. Equally, the political attitudes and behaviour of both samples are remarkably similar. This is not to claim that Internet users and non-users display similar characteristics. On the contrary, it will be shown that the two populations are different. It is the presence in the postal sample of Internet users that make it then similar and easily comparable with the online population.¹²

Data analysis

Socio-demographic profile and general political attitudes

Our survey's results on the socio-demographic profile of CA members tend to corroborate the stereotypical picture of CA members. Alliance membership is predominantly male – two in three members – and drawn from the eldest segment of the population, as 37% is in the 50-69 age band, and 26% is above 70 years old. Conversely, only 3% of members are aged under 26. Income levels are also relatively high. Only 21% of membership reports earnings below £15,000 per year, whereas, 40% report earnings in excess of £35,000. Both occupational patterns and education levels reflect the age profile of membership. Almost 40% are retired, whilst only 2% are students. Furthermore, one in ten do not have formal schooling qualifications.¹³ However, one in three hold a University degree, while an additional one in six members have A levels. Those members in active employment include 20% in professional and higher technical work, whilst small business owners represent the 13% of the membership.

Our data also help to profile members' political attitudes more precisely than anecdotal media reports. The curve of CA membership political interest approximates remarkably closely to the normal distribution. In other words, numbers decrease along the ideological slopes of political activism and apathy, with a robust predominance of neutral attitudes towards politics. In fact, 53 % of members report an 'average' interest in politics. 15% and 20% respectively claim to be 'not much' or 'very' interested in politics. Finally, about 5% report to be either a political activist or completely disengaged from politics. The political views of CA members lean clearly to the centre-right of the political spectrum. On the left-right scale (range: 0-6), the average CA member scores 4.3, which is located approximately between the centre and the right extreme (mode = 4). The very low variance (SD = 1.1) suggests that the group is ideologically homogeneous, at least on the traditional left-right dimension. Such 'moderate' results with regard to members' political views and interest are somewhat puzzling, since a sizeable minority, (one in three), are affiliated to the Conservative Party. Upon closer analysis, however, it is revealed that Conservative party members are, as one would expect, significantly more interested in politics ($\gamma = .43$, sig. $p < 0.001$, N = 1168), and further on the right than non party-affiliated members ($\gamma = .33$, sig. $p < 0.001$, N = 1118). In short, CA membership is constituted by a core of politically moderate members - both in terms of ideology and activism - and a large subgroup of conservative, politically active members.

Most of the respondents report being long-term supporters of the CA, having first joined the BFSS (49 %). Therefore, our data provides qualified support for the claim that the CA has at its core the interests of hunting fraternity. The qualification can be found in the composition of the other half of the membership, which is compounded of more recent recruits to the Alliance. One in six respondents are very recent recruits (members for a year or less), one in five have joined CA 2-3 years ago, and only one in ten reports having joined 4-5 years ago.¹⁴ However, we found no significant difference between old and new members in terms of political orientations. In sum the profile of the growth in membership tentatively suggest that the CA have succeeded in their aim of widening their membership base.

In terms of organisational involvement, respondents report high levels of activity (table 1). Low-engagement activities are quite common amongst the membership. Three in four members regularly read CA literature, while two in four talk to colleagues and friends about the organisation. Also, about the same proportion donates money to the CA. Respondents also report high levels of campaign engagement, of different types. Around 60% of membership attends political rallies and demonstrations, with 35% also attending fairs and social / organisational events. An additional 10% claim to campaign for the CA. The last set of indicators, which we might define 'sub-elite' organisational behaviour, record considerably lesser numbers. A proportion ranging from 1.5% and 2.5% hold official positions, visits CA offices and HQ or volunteers clerical work for the organisation.¹⁵

Table 1. Organisational involvement of CA members.

	Overall	Online	Postal	Difference
Read CA's literature	73 %	72 %	74 %	- 0.02
Attend rallies / demonstrations	60 %	67 %	47 %	- 0.20 ***
Talk to colleagues / friends about the CA	51 %	56 %	42 %	- 0.13 ***
Donate money	49 %	46 %	54 %	0.07 *
Attend fairs / social events	36 %	39 %	29 %	- 0.10 **
Meet with other members	14 %	17 %	11 %	- 0.08 **
Campaign for the CA	10 %	14 %	3 %	- 0.18 ***
Official position	2.5 %	4 %	1 %	- 0.10 ***
Visit CA offices	2 %	3 %	.	- 0.09 **
Volunteer clerical work	1.5 %	2 %	.	- 0.08 **
	N	1190	779	411

Difference is measured with Φ , * = sig. p. < 0.05, ** = sig. p. < 0.01, *** = sig. p. \leq 0.001.

Internet adoption and use

CA members report remarkably high levels of Internet access and use, even more so in relation with the age profile of the membership. 57% of the membership have accessed the Internet, begin defined as e-mail, WWW and Intranet systems (N = 411). This roughly corresponds to the British average, as individual access to Internet was recorded at 62% in October 2002 (ONS, 2002). 96% of online members have used e-mail, 90% have accessed the WWW, while 32% have used an Intranet/close-access communication system. Access from home exceeds access at work, for both the online and the offline respondents (table 2). The largest difference between the two groups (online and postal) concerns access at home. In fact, 91% of online respondents have an Internet connection at home, compared to 86% of postal respondents. Whereas, the difference is smaller when it comes to access at work - 62% and 57% respectively.

Table 2. Internet access at home and work.

		Never	Once a month or less	Once a week	Every other day	Daily	Many times a day
		%	%	%	%	%	%
Home	Online	9	4	15	17	34	22
	Postal	14	11	19	18	30	8
Work	Online	38	2	3	4	17	36
	Postal	43	5	6	6	15	27

Online survey N = 779. Postal survey N = 236.

Despite relatively high levels of Internet access, both at home and at work, accessing of the CA website is not very widespread. 45% of members have never accessed the CA website, 10% have done so once, and an additional 25% has accessed the site irregularly, in relation to specific events. Thus, only one in five of members use their organisation's site regularly. On the other hand, these figures are comparable with those relative to use of traditional technologies to keep in touch with the CA – phone (45%), letter (48%) and face-to-face meetings (44%). The only notable exception is 'print material from the organisation' (76%), which does not require members' initiative.

The site is accessed mainly for information purposes (table 3). This can be seen from the most frequently accessed features which include information on current events (93% of members), about CA campaigns (89 %) and policy (86 %). The grass e-route, which is CA e-mail bulletin, is received by 84 % of online members, and CA newsletter and magazine on the site by 83%. Information is also the most highly valued feature of the site. The mean usefulness for information ranges from 4.3 to 4.7, measured on a 0-6 scale. Grass e-routes is the most popular information source with a mean usefulness of 5.1. Organisational information and feedback scores lower, both in terms of access and usefulness. In terms of the attractiveness of online joining or recruitment possibilities, it is interesting to note that the online membership application/renewal has been accessed by half of the online members, and rated just above average ($\mu = 3.6$, $SD = 1.7$).

Table 3. Access to and usefulness of CA website features.

	Access %	Mean usefulness	SD
Information on current events	93	4.7	1.2
Information on CA campaigns	89	4.6	1.2
Information on policy	86	4.7	1.3
Grass e-route	84	5.1	1.2
Newsletter / magazines	83	4.3	1.3
Information on CA structure	73	3.6	1.6
Links to related sites	66	3.9	1.6
Feedback (e.g. E-mail)	56	3.7	1.8
Membership application / renewal	52	3.6	1.7
Internet trade directory	47	2.8	1.7
Educational section	44	3.3	1.7
CA Internet auction	44	2.7	1.8
Discussion point	42	3.0	1.7

N = 858 (both online and postal). Includes members who have visited the CA website. Usefulness of site features is measured on a 0-6 scale.

More interactive, online ‘community’ type of features – such as the online trade directory, the educational section, discussion point and online auction – are the least popular, with access in the range 42-47 %, and mean usefulness between 2.7 and 3.3. This result is confirmed by the nature of those features members would like to see on the CA site where traditional political activities outweigh possible new modes of virtual politics. For example, the ability to sign petitions online was rated at 5.1 on a 0-6 scale of desirability. This was followed by a range of traditional political features. Access to a local branch website scored an average of 4.3, e-mail details of leadership 3.9. Online voting for both CA policies and elected officials were also reported as highly desirable features ($\mu = 4$ and $\mu = 3.8$ respectively). However, the more innovative, online features – such as online discussion fora and members only area of the site – scored lower averages had higher variance and higher DK rates (table 4).¹⁶

Table 4. Desirability of CA website features.

	Mean	SD	DK
Online petitions to sign	5.1	1.5	4 %
Website of local branch	4.3	1.8	3 %
Online voting for policy issues	4.0	1.9	5 %
E-mail details of leadership	3.9	1.8	6 %
Online voting for elected officials	3.8	1.9	5 %
List of members in my area	3.7	2.0	4 %
Members only area of the site	3.5	2.1	9 %
Online discussion forums	2.9	1.8	9 %

N = 948. Members who are Internet users. Both online and surveys.

Expanding organisational reach?

A different membership can be reached by the use of the Internet (table 5). Zero-order correlations results suggest that Internet user is significantly younger than the average CA member, from a higher educational background and, partly as a consequence, has higher income levels than the CA average.

Equally, in terms of occupation, Internet users tend to be employed in professional/higher technical/managerial jobs, significantly more so than their non-user counterpart. This partly depends on the rate of retired members in the two groups, as only one in five members who are Internet users are retired, compared to two in three amongst non-users. There are also interesting regional differences in Internet use. Internet users reside principally, in the London – south east area, while they are under-represented in Scotland, especially in east Scotland. The profiling of political attitudes also yields interesting results. Internet users tend to be recent recruits to the CA and, furthermore, they report significantly higher levels of interest in politics, this being especially true for online respondents. Finally, slightly more members are male than female among Internet users as compared to non-users. Overall, then, the CA seems to reach online an audience which is different from their traditional fieldsports base, an audience which is younger, slightly more engaged with the organisation, and might otherwise be more difficult to reach using traditional media.¹⁷

The strength and extent of this working hypothesis was then been tested using three sets of results from our survey. First, we asked about the profile of those members, specifically Internet users, who have visited the CA website. Data suggests that site visitors come equally from different SES and political interest categories, except for age, as younger members-users tend to visit the site more often than any other category of members. In general then, we can specify that CA attracts to the site younger than average members, who are otherwise quite

similar to membership at large. Second, we asked about the frequency and mode of contact with the CA of members who are Internet users first, and then site visitors. Within the wide range of media members might use to keep in touch with CA – letter, fax, phone, face-to-face and printed material, we have identified a significant substitution effect with letter writing. Members who are also Internet users tend to write to CA considerably less often than average ($\gamma = .24$, sig. $p < 0.01$, $N = 420$). Third, we asked about (online) survey respondents who are not members, although they use the CA site and grass e-route to keep in touch with the organisation. 25% of online respondents are not CA members. Per se, this figure is telling about the capacity of the Internet to reach beyond the boundaries of the ‘institutional’ organisation. When we check the media consumption habits of this group¹⁸, then, we find they are significantly and considerably less likely to use any traditional media to keep in touch with the CA (γ ranges from 0.41 to 0.84, all sig. $p < 0.001$, $N = 1008$). Additionally, they are younger ($\gamma = .24$, sig. $p < 0.001$, $N = 1039$) and have lower income levels ($\gamma = .17$, sig. $p < 0.001$, $N = 1033$). Hence, both the grass e-route and the CA site may serve to both numerically expand membership but also diversify the profile of that membership.

Table 5. Socio-demographic characteristics of CA members.

		<i>Non users</i>	<i>Users</i>
Gender	Female	43%	31%
Age	18 to 25	1%	4%
	26 - 35	2%	12%
	36 - 49	10%	33%
	Above 70	44%	7%
Income	£ 25,000 to £ 34,999	13%	20%
	£ 35,000 to £ 49,999	10%	15%
	£ 50,000 or more	15%	26%
Education	No qualifications	15%	1%
	Professional qualification	12%	7%
	GCSE - O levels	29%	17%
	A levels	13%	20%
	Undergraduate degree (e.g. BA)	17%	31%
	Postgraduate degree (e.g. MA)	4%	13%
Residence	Scotland East	5 %	2 %
	London	3%	8%
	Wessex	4%	8%
Occupation	Professional or higher technical work	5%	32%
	Manager or Senior Administrator	4%	14%
	Small business owner	10%	18%
	Student		2%
	Retired	64%	19%
N		175	1115

Figures reported are column percentages. Only category values where differences between users and non-users are significant at $p < 0.05$ are reported.

Increasing engagement?

Both email and the WWW have an important role for increasing members’ levels of activism, especially in relation with campaign activities. As we noted above, the possibility to sign online petitions is the single, most important features members would like to see on the CA site. We

then asked members whether the CA website and e-mails from the organisation led them to engage in a range of organisational activities. The results suggest that both media play an important role in mobilising supporters. The most significant results are indeed in the area of mobilisation (table 6). In fact, 31% of members claimed that use of the CA websites led them to participate in the London March. Surprisingly, postal respondents equal this average whereas online respondents are below average and 45% of non-member users of the site report the web as a main influence. Similarly, 15% and 13% of the members respectively claimed that the web led them to attend another rally/demonstration or participate in a specific campaign. Hence, web mobilisation is strong, and concerns mostly audiences which, at least in theory, are supposedly less suitable for a 'net effect'. Furthermore, the web is an important stimulus for individualised forms of political participation, such as writing letters to political representatives (18%) and to the media (12%). Finally, the web is much less functional to engaging members in routine collective organisational activities: volunteering time/work, attending branch meetings, purchase services. E-mail is reportedly at least as important as the web in facilitating campaign participation. Almost every other respondent claims that email has led them to attend the London march; in addition, one in three report attending another rally and one in four to participate in a specific campaign due to e-mail communication from the CA. E-mail has also an extremely important contacting function. Almost 42% report that e-mail led them to write to a representative, and 47% forwarded the information received. Additionally, 25% have contacted the media after receiving an e-mail from Countryside Alliance. Finally, e-mail seems marginally more effective than the web in drawing people into routine activities. Conversely, the website is relatively more effective in eliciting donations, and for the purpose of joining the organisation.

Finally, one important insight is relative to the difference between e-mail and the web as tools of mobilisation for different constituencies. E-mail clearly emerged as a much more important activation factor for online respondents, including non-members, than for postal respondents. Conversely, the web is only slightly more important for those who respond online. That the web is mainly an entry point for subsequent, higher level engagement with a political organisation is in line with the results of previous studies about the use of the Internet to mobilise supporters (Ward, Lusoli and Gibson, 2003). However, the results of this study challenge the received view that e-mail is the 'killer application' in online campaigning, a powerful activation tool for newcomers to politics on the Net. Our data suggests that e-mail is a powerful mobilisation tool for members who are already engaged online. Conversely, the WWW has a wider impact on less frequent and less active Internet users.

Table 6. Web and e-mail activation.

	Website			E-mail		
	Postal members	Online members	Non members	Postal members	Online members	Non members
<i>Campaign activities</i>						
Attend the London March	31	28	45	22	50	58
Attend other rally or demonstration	11	16	14	8	42	22
Participate in a specific campaign	9	14	11	7	34	17
<i>Contact activities</i>						
Write to an elected representative	17	20	14	13	53	29
Write to the media	9	13	10	8	34	15
Forward information to a friend (non member)	14	17	19	16	56	48
Contact the CA with views / comments	6	10	7	7	27	18
Contact other members	2	5	6	5	24	13
<i>Money-related activities</i>						
Donate money to CA	14	16	13	8	27	14
Join the CA	11	13	3	2	11	7
<i>Institutional activities</i>						
Attend a social event	5	7	4	6	19	8
Volunteer some time / work	4	4	2	3	16	6
Attend a local branch meeting	3	4	1	4	16	1
Purchase services	3	9	6	2	7	3
	N	242	759	261		

Results reported are percentages. Source: Q8 Has use of the Countryside Alliance website or email information from the Countryside Alliance ever led you to undertake any of the following activities...

The march on-London

Within this framework of reference, we tried to assess more precisely what the importance of the Internet was for the march in London. We specifically asked members about attendance to the march, sources of information used to keep informed about the event and frequency of access to the special London march site (<http://www.march-info.org>). On average, the march was attended by 63 % of the membership. The most important media for information on the march was reportedly different for different types of member respondents. Printed material from the Alliance is, on average, the highest rated media, followed by the national press (table 7). Online media, such as CA mailing list and the two websites are much more important for online respondents than for postal respondents. This is hardly surprising, even though knowledge about the websites negatively biases the results. i.e. the low score depends mainly on a lack of visibility rather than a negative assessment of the service. Indeed, the high SD value for postal respondents show that once the sites or email service were accessed, the evaluations are substantially higher, even higher than value attributed to traditional media.

Table 7. Importance of march media.

		Internet use and administration mode		
		<i>Non-users</i>	<i>Users - postal</i>	<i>Users - online</i>
National press	Mean	4.1	4.0	3.4
	SD	2.2	2.0	2.1
Local press	Mean	2.7	2.6	1.9
	SD	2.5	2.4	2.1
Printed material from CA	Mean	4.6	4.8	4.3
	SD	2.0	1.6	1.9
Word of mouth	Mean	3.3	3.8	3.9
	SD	2.5	2.2	2.1
Website of the March	Mean	.	2.7	4.5
	SD	.	2.5	1.9
CA national site	Mean	.	2.4	4.1
	SD	.	2.4	2.1
Grass e-route mailing list	Mean	.	3.0	5.2
	SD	.	2.6	1.6

Results are based on the entire sample.

Finally, we sought to regress the importance of the web as a mobilising factor for the London March on the range of SES, attitudinal and information seeking behaviours discussed above. This allows us to gain a better understanding of the nature of web mobilization in the case of the London event. It is worth remembering that 31% of members who use the net reported the web as an important stimulus for them to join in the march. The results of our final logistic model are quite telling (table 8). In terms of political profile, the web seems to be especially important for recent CA members, and members who are less likely to have contact with their fellow members. Mobilised members are habitual users of the web, and have frequently accessed both the March site and the CA main site. Web-activated respondents are also more likely to have followed the campaign in the press, which indicates a reinforcement effect between printed and new media (the same does not apply to television, for instance). Furthermore, it is interesting to note that online respondents are more likely to report web-activation than postal respondents.

Table 8. Determinants of web activation for the March.

Length of CA membership	0.67	***
Frequency of access to the March site	1.58	***
Frequency of use of the WWW	1.27	**
Frequency of access to the CA site	1.26	**
Importance of the press for information about the March	1.23	***
Meet with other members (Yes)	0.50	**
Online survey (Yes)	0.52	*
Constant	0.09	***

N = 713. $\chi^2(7df) = 111$ ***. Cases correctly classified = 74.2 %

Results refers to members who have attended the March. Results reported are standardised log coefficients.

* = sig. p. < 0.05. ** = sig. p. < 0.01, *** = sig. p < 0.001

Finally, the most conspicuous finding is the absence of traditional SES from any equations built to predict web mobilisation. Both at zero-order and all other things being equal (*ceteris paribus*), traditional SES variables – high income, low age and higher education – have insignificant and weak relation with web mobilisation. Equally, the level of respondents' political interest and left-right orientations seem to have no effect on online mobilisation. Therefore, online mobilisation seems to be embedded in online dynamics i.e. general web habits and activities, rather than follow pre-existing, traditional patterns of political socialisation. In other words, online mobilisation builds more on the familiarity with information technologies than on a personal history of political engagement – or the lack of it. If the question is asked whether the Internet is mobilising a new constituency, the answer is probably yes. Yet, if we ask whether the Internet has mobilised the already engaged (existing activists) or the disengaged (politically uninterested), the answer our data suggest is a resounding 'neither'. The constituency reached by the web is very new to issue politics, has average levels of political activism and no specific socio-demographic traits. They may have latent sympathies for the issue or organisation but it is the ICTs that seem to make them an 'engageable' constituency. This possibly supports early claims of political dis-intermediation via ICTs, albeit in the context of a political organisation rather than a polity at large (Becker, 1981; Poster, 1996; for a critique see also Coleman, 1999). The question remains, however, whether the mobilising importance of ICTs remains once they are exposed to 'real' life political events. In other words, further research is needed to explore the changing relations of mutual relationship between the virtual and the real in the domain of political mobilisation.

Conclusions

Clearly the survey here cannot claim to be representative of the pressure group/social movement world as a whole. However, it does add additional evidence to claims about the relationship between the new media and participation in an organisational context. In particular, it sheds additional light on questions of who participates online (the widening question), what types of participation they are engaged in the (the deepening question) but also how and why people participate and role of new ICTs in this process.

Despite increasing scepticism that ICTs can really *widen* participation, our survey indicates that a widening potential remains. Of course, this is not a uniform process - certain groups are more susceptible to online mobilisation than others. Moreover, this study of CA also underlines once again the importance of organisations in the mobilisation process and more specifically the organisational context and culture. Despite the hype about ICTs fostering a more direct form of democracy, organisations still have key role to play in the participatory politics. Nevertheless, if ICTs are to be used to widen political participation then they need to be linked to wider communication strategy. In our study, ICTs were embedded into CAs

broader organisational strategy of widening its general profile (both in issue and membership terms). ICTs were used as one means of facilitating the CA to achieve this broader organisational goal.

We also found evidence of *deepening* in our survey. Members were engaging in new activities online, especially those who were already the most active in CA, and generally members who saw ICTs as a valuable resource in this respect. Again, this not a uniform process. When we look at the types of participation most undertaken and valued, it is generally the more passive and individualised forms of activity that have increased, notably receiving and reading information. Whilst much of the academic and media focus of e-participation has been on e-enabled interactive discussion, (bulletin boards, chat rooms etc.), these types of e-participation are the ones less favoured by participants. For professional protest movements such as the CA therefore, the technology is beneficial in the context of mobilisation via top-down information and political marketing rather than as networking or discussion tool. Again, this reiterates the point that political organisations will use the technologies in ways which bolster their pre-existing organisational culture i.e. organisations which have a strong participatory ethos will use the technology to further enable this. Professional protest organisations that have less of a commitment to grassroots democracy are likely to use them for information dissemination and as occasional mobilising tools.

In addition to our evidence on widening and deepening participation, the survey also provided evidence of how people are activated. Whilst we often speak of the role of ICTs or the new media per se, this combines the differences sorts of technology into one category with apparently uniform effects. The research here supports other organisational surveys we have conducted [Ward et al 2003] that the use of different types of ICT may well produce different participatory results. It appears from an organisational perspective that websites are more useful for initial recruitment and information dissemination purposes, whilst email is then more useful than activating members.

Finally, the standard story of online participation is that generally those who are already active offline extend their behaviour into the virtual world to supplement their traditional political activities (the reinforcement effect). Whilst we do not dispute this, our survey intriguingly found some evidence of a possible Internet effect. The survey uncovered a group of averagely politically interested people, not active offline who were mobilised through the net. As yet we have no way of knowing whether this is a novelty factor or how such a group will be socialised over time. What is now required is long-term tracking of such a group and additional qualitative data (interviews, online diaries etc.) on whether 'virtual' mobilisation then turns into 'real' political activity. Do people activated online with little or no previous political history gradually become politicised and engaged both on and offline over time? If this were to be the case, then new ICTs may well be offering something novel to participatory politics.

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Notes

¹ See for example discussion of the Stop the War campaign online in 'revolution for revolt' Alistair Alexander, *The Guardian*, 20 February, 2003.

² See for example: Corporate Watch's Report (2002) 'The Countryside Alliance - Voice of the Rural Dispossessed?!' http://www.coporatewatch.org.uk/pages/Countryside_Alliance.html; 'Hunters Accused of Hijacking Protest', John Vidal, *The Guardian*, 21 September, 2002.

³ Interviewed for e-politix 20 September 2002.

⁴ All the broadsheets and mid range newspapers carried the march as front-page news. The Daily Telegraph, a staunch supporter of CA's hunting stance, carried five pages of coverage.

⁵ See for example, 'We've been acting like the IRA' *Guardian Online*, 30 August 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/country/article/0,2763,783215,00.html>

⁶ See Countryside Alliance press release, 25th October 2002, 'Countryside Alliance Membership Breaks 100,000', <http://www.countryside-alliance.org/news/02/021025tat.htm>.

⁷ See the following surveys: 'The Countryside March - Who was really there?' MORI 1997, <http://www.mori.com/polls/1998/hunting3.shtml>; 'the Edinburgh Countryside March Poll', MORI 2001, <http://www.mori.com/polls/2001/edinburgh.shtml>; 'Hunting March Unrepresentative of the Countryside' League Against Cruel Sports press release, 22 September 2002, http://www.league.uk.com/news/media_briefings/2002/september_2002/22_sep_02_hunting_march_unrepresentative.htm.

⁸ This section is based partly on information gathered from several interviews with CA staff.

⁹ For example, one perhaps exaggerated report in *the Guardian* ('Hunt Lobby holds personal files on thousands', November 1, 2002) suggested that the CA have an extremely sophisticated database records on supporters and some of its opponents.

¹⁰ See article 'anti-government activism' at www.globalprofile.co.uk.

¹¹ The survey questionnaire can be found online at <http://www.ipop.org.uk>.

¹² On-liners are very similar in the two modes of administration, and represent a progressive element for the re-balancing of the response bias. In fact, the online component represents in a way an over-sample of those least likely to respond to traditional methods of administration. This is not to infer either that this line of reasoning has general value, and can be extended to other, online surveys or online polling in general. Great caution is needed to generalise from a specific online population to other populations.

¹³ This again depends on age, as the school system has changed considerably over time. A number of respondents report in the 'other' option of the education variable 'school certificate', often obtained in the 40s and 50s.

¹⁴ The low statistical incidence of the '4-5 years' category might be due to a subtraction effect. In fact, members who have first joined BFSS and have joined 4-5 years ago might have opted for the former rather than the latter category. This would also show a still remarkable 'organisational residual' a few years after the CA has replaced BFSS with concern to membership and central administration.

¹⁵ Levels of involvement of online and postal respondents are different. Specifically, online respondents report significantly higher levels of campaign involvement than postal respondents (table 1). It might be claimed that as postal respondents are older, they might also have lower levels of organisational involvement. Especially, this might be true for political activities such as attending rallies and social events which require mobility. Controlling for age, this is not the case.

¹⁶ A further question on comfort using the Internet rather than traditional media for a range of organisational activities. The question was asked of Internet users and non-users alike. Responses tend to corroborate the findings reported in text. Again, institutional and campaign activities score remarkably higher than any other organisational activities. The results are not reported in this paper for reasons of space.

¹⁷ Also, we run a logistic regression with internet use as dependent variable. We included SES and political attitudes variables having significant zero-order correlations as independents. Several alternative models all suggested that occupation, income and age are the main predictors, while betas for political orientations and political engagement were either non-significant or small.

¹⁸ In this case, we use online respondents who are members as the contrast group. N = 1039, members n = 779, non members n = 260 (as reported, about 25 %).