The cyber butterfly effect nets political change

Lobbying is normally associated with shady back-room deals, with lobbyists waiting outside the halls of power, hoping to get a minister or legislator to listen to their position.

However, this process can now become more transparent and can empower those who previously felt they were merely subject to the decisions of their governments.

Cyberlobbying is taking place around the world — in Romania, the Minister of Education threatens to close down an award-winning alternative school because its lunch diet is vegetarian.

The school teacher, understanding that the community and children love her school, but that the community and parents association was not strong enough to take on the Minister, starts a net campaign.

While she previously might have just given into whims of the Ministry, armed with a PC and a modem, she sends out e-mails to the world vegetarian association, to Ananda Marga net (a social and spiritual organisation which has many vegetarian schools), as well as others.

She asks them to send faxes and call the Ministry. They do. Within a few weeks, the Minister reverses his decision.

International pressure plus more information on vegetarianism shows him that it is not weird to be vegetarian and not against Romanian culture.

What are the lessons here? First, the person acted. While she worked through the net, she was careful to use other media as well — phone and fax.

In another example, Munawar Anees, a scholar and editor of *Periodica Islamica*, is arrested by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir. He is tortured while in jail and, from the beatings and bad conditions, has a heart attack.

His colleagues begin a free Munawar Anees campaign. A web site (www.dranees.org) is set up. A listserve (friends@dranees.com) is also set up. It acts as a clearing house for thousands of people around the world.

No administrative staff is needed for the office since there is no need for an office.

Faxes are sent daily to Dr Mahathir. Eventually, Amnesty International adopts Anees as a political prisoner.

Alvin Toffler, a close friend of Anees, becomes involved, calls Dr Mahathir and asks him to release Mr Anees. Dr Mahathir

Powerful governments are being brought to heel by the internet-savvy public, who are finding it easier to get their way by sending an e-mail than by marching in the streets. Watch out for the new brand of political action sweeping the world, says Sohail Inayatullah.

refuses. International pressure continues. Toffler threatens to end his support for the multimedia superhighway corridor in Kuala Lumpur's Klang Valley.

He makes sure to remind Dr Mahathir that becoming a post-industrial nation can only occur when citizens are not in fear of the government. Eventually, the international pressure ensures that Mr Anees gets a fair trial.

With the world gaze on them, the government drops charges. Dr Mahathir is, of course, recalcitrant when it comes to international pressure on human rights but with the nation's future at stake, he had to rein in the police.

He did, however, put government warnings on Anwar Ibrahim's website stating that it was biased and did not reflect the Government's position. (Dr Munawar Anees was accused of letting Anwar sodomise him.)

What are the lessons from this episode? In this case, a group of people acted, used multimedia — fax, phone, website, listserve. The only cost was that of setting up the website, otherwise a momentous campaign was orchestrated without any administrative staff.

Instead of huge mailouts, individuals were told to go to Anees's website for the details of his detainment.

A third example involved not one or two individuals, but thousands. It, too, uses the net but augments it with other media and involves the 1996/97 Belgrade student revolution.

With Prime Minister Milosevic controlling the media — the State-run media — the alternative media reported on the thousands of people in the streets, demanding that the winners of the election for the mayorship of Belgrade and Novi Sad be installed.

Mr Milosevic closed down the press, but he could not close down the net. Thousands of overseas Yugoslavs and international press used it for their newsfeeds, as did students in Serbia.

A few student activists kept the informa-

tion coming and what Milosevic had hoped would be a minor event came to be a global happening.

As with the other examples, multimedia was used. The Belgrade protests remained non-violent, partly because the students did not want the police to kill them, and also they knew that, just as the world's eyes were on Mr Milosevic, they were on them as well.

The net forced both to be transparent.

There are numerous other examples as well — the Zapatista have used the web as a information clearing house and as an advocacy centre, and as a place to list abuses. (Kathleen Grassel has written on this in New Renaissance: www.ru.org.)

And in Suva, Fiji, working visas of journalism lecturers were threatened because of differences with government media policy. However, international pressure, again orchestrated through the web, forced the Fijian Government to grant the visas.

One person cyberlobbying changes normal politics because it can be done by one person.

It is the cyber butterfly effect. One person, or a small group of persons, can undercut traditional structures of power. There are some safeguards on cyberlobbying as one still needs many people acting to make it work — a lone mad person will quickly lose legitimacy for his or her cause.

It makes all politics more transparent. However, cyberlobbying does not replace traditional politics; rather it augments it.

It must be part of an overall campaign that includes face to face, fax, telephone, direct political action, voting, street demonstration.

Cyberlobbying also leads to the beginning of global politics. World opinion becomes a factor in every nation's and corporation's politics. While some presidents have understood that getting on CNN is more important than a hearing at the United Nations, they still have not understood the power of web sites, and the ability of the small to change the big.

For governments being lobbied, the worst thing to do is to put warnings on other's web sites. The best defence is more openness, is inclusion of other perspectives, deep consultation with others. If they don't, the cyber butterfly will make sure that in the long run they do.

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