

MULTIMEDIA TRAINING KIT

Group discussions and case studies: Freedom of association and freedom of assembly

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Questions for use in group discussions

These questions should provide an opportunity for participants to share experiences and explore some of the issues raised in the text handout and presentation.

1. How has the internet changed opportunities for freedom of association in my country/our countries? What advantage have individuals and organisations taken of these opportunities?
2. How much difference does the internet make to the ability of individuals, organisations and groups to organise protests or demonstrations?
3. What is the meaning of online assembly? How does it relate to offline assembly? Share your examples and experiences.
4. Does the internet pose any threats to freedom of association and assembly? Do any risks to other rights need to be taken into account, for example, to the rights of minorities?
5. What are the benefits and risks associated with anonymity and pseudonymity?

Case studies and examples for group discussions – Scenario 1

Idle No More

Idle No More is a protest movement amongst Aboriginal peoples in Canada, including the First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, which emerged in 2012 and became prominent through a series of demonstrations and other activities in early 2013. It is critical both of the Canadian government's policies towards Aboriginal communities in Canada and of the performance of the established representatives of those communities. Protest activities have included blockades of transport routes, flash mobs and other public events.

Social networks have played a prominent part in the organisation and coordination of these activities by a group which presents itself as a movement rather than a conventional political organisation. They have increased opportunities for participation in politics, made information about relevant issues more available to those affected, and facilitated the organisation of activities.

Erica Lee, a student at the University of Saskatchewan, manages Idle No More's Facebook page. She described the impact of social media as follows to the *Toronto Star* (reference below):

Traditionally, it's the chiefs and the people in power that have the ability to speak to the media, whereas now, people like me – university students who have been involved in this kind of stuff – are getting interviewed. Social media allows the people who are actually directly involved and impacted by these kind of movements ... to have their voices heard.

The movement's Facebook page, she said:

... gives people, especially in northern communities and rural First Nations communities, a chance to be connected with events and be inspired by other people's events that they might not have access to, that they aren't seeing on TV and in newspapers.

Twitter has also been significant. The hashtag #idlenomore was first used on 1 December 2012. Three weeks later it was mentioned 40,000 times.

Commentators on Idle No More have argued that social media has had two important impacts: it has enabled the movement to aggregate local grievances into a national movement; and it has brought a new generation of potential leaders to the fore. They point out, however, that access to the internet is still poor in many First Nations communities, suggesting that social media may also lead to a shift in political engagement and influence from those living in poorer rural areas to more educated urban activists.

Information about this example can be found at:

- www.thestar.com/news/canada/politics/article/1313874--social-media-helps-drive-idle-no-more-movement
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idle_No_More
- idlenomore.ca
- www.facebook.com/IdleNoMoreCommunity

Questions for discussion

1. How significant are social media to the development of political movements in your country/ies? How representative are social media users of their communities?

2. Are social media changing the nature of political activity or participation? Are they making protest more effective?
3. How can rights organisations harness social media to monitor events and increase their influence?

Case studies and examples for group discussions – Scenario 2

Women organising in Saudi Arabia

Women's rights are severely curtailed in Saudi Arabia. Women are required to have the consent of a male "guardian" to work or travel, and are banned from many workplaces. Women's association and organisation have been severely constrained by the limitations placed on them.

Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world where women are banned from driving, and this has become a symbol of demands for women's emancipation in the country. Women's rights campaigners have used the internet as a means to organise and publicise protest against the ban, seeking its removal. They have cited the experience of political protest in other countries, during the events that are widely called the "Arab Spring", as a source of inspiration. Building support can in this case be seen as online association, and protest as online assembly.

The Women2Drive campaign began in April 2011, using Facebook and Twitter to build support among women in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, ahead of a planned day of civil disobedience by women defying the ban in June (see e.g. twitter.com/Women2Drive). A YouTube video of one prominent women's rights campaigner, Manal al-Sharif, driving, which was posted in May 2011, led to her arrest and worldwide publicity. (The video, with English subtitles, can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=sowNSH_W2r0&feature=player_embedded). This incident led to other women posting videos of themselves driving online, and to widespread comment within Saudi Arabia using Facebook, Twitter and blogs.

As well as building support in Saudi Arabia itself, Women2Drive's online campaign led to international solidarity campaigns, including a petition on the global website change.org, and the public support of US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton.

Information on the Women2Drive campaign can be found at:

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_to_drive_movement
- www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jun/03/saudi-arabia-women2drive-women-driving
- mashable.com/category/women2drive

Questions for discussion

1. What opportunities does the internet provide for association and collective protest in countries where these rights are severely curtailed? What can campaigners in other countries learn from this experience?
2. What is the relationship between online and offline association and protest in this example and in other countries? Are there significant differences between this and other experiences?
3. How can the internet be used to secure international support for national protest? How valuable is this?

Case studies and examples for group discussions – Scenario 3

Distributed denial of service attacks – Anonymous

A distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack is an attempt, by one or more parties, to make an internet resource, such as a website, unavailable to those that want to use it. This can be done, for example, by flooding the target server with traffic, preventing it from providing its intended service or causing it to shut down. There are a number of different ways in which DDoS attacks can be mounted, some of which exploit peer-to-peer networks or use botnets – networks of computers which have been compromised through malware. The online activist group Anonymous (below) makes use of relatively simple software to overload target servers.

DDoS attacks have been made by a range of different actors. In 2007, for example, a series of DDoS attacks on various state and non-state bodies in Estonia were attributed to Russian politicians or government agencies. Other instances have been attributed to hostile states and criminal organisations. Attacks have been made on government, business and civil society servers, including those of human rights groups. Although DDoS attacks can be undertaken by any type of organisation, they require a level of internet expertise and access to internet resources which are not available to all.

The online activist group Anonymous has used hacking – obtaining unauthorised access to a computer system or website and using that access to alter material on the site – and DDoS attacks on various state and non-state actors since its origins in 2003. Its targets have included government bodies in a number of countries, intellectual property agencies, media organisations and others such as the Church of Scientology.

DDoS attacks are considered a violation of the Internet Architecture Board’s policy concerning proper use of the internet, which describes as “unethical and unacceptable” any activity which disrupts the intended use of the internet, wastes resources or compromises user privacy (tools.ietf.org/html/rfc1087). They are also violations of the acceptable use policies of most internet service providers and many countries’ national laws.

Some have argued that DDoS attacks by groups such as Anonymous are protests which should be considered a form of peaceful online assembly – the online equivalent of a sit-in or of picketing by a trade union. Others argue that DDoS attacks infringe others’ rights to freedom of expression and association, the right of access to information and the right of access to the internet itself. Questions are also raised about the representativeness and accountability of groups such as Anonymous.

Information about this example can be found at:

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denial-of-service_attack#Peer-to-peer_attacks
- arstechnica.com/business/2012/04/chinese-human-rights-website-and-host-threatened-by-ddos-attacks/
- www.apc.org/en/system/files/cyr%20english%20alex%20comminos%20pdf.pdf

Questions for discussion

1. Should activities such as distributed denial of service attacks be regarded as protest activities equivalent to peaceful offline assemblies?
2. How do they relate to other people’s rights to access the internet, information on the internet, and freedom of expression and association?
3. Does their use for protest purposes legitimise the use of similar attacks by government and other non-state actors?

Questions for use in final discussion session

1. What should be the role of governments in enabling and protecting the exercise of freedom of association and assembly through the internet? How should they go about this?
2. What should human rights organisations do to promote the rights to freedom of association and assembly on the internet? How should they monitor and respond to violations of these rights?