

**Making Global Publics?  
Communication and Knowledge Production in the  
World Social Forum Process**

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I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Wherever contributions of others are involved, these are clearly acknowledged.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis provides an in-depth empirical analysis of the character and significance of media and communication in the World Social Forum (WSF), focusing on their relationship to processes of knowledge production. Using the concept of publics as a theoretical tool, it explores how, through mediated communication, forum organisers and communication activists seek to extend the WSF in time and space and thereby make it public. Engaging critically with the idea of the WSF as a global process, the thesis considers how mediated communication might contribute to making the WSF global, not so much in absolute terms as by creating a sense of globality, and how the idea of the global relates to other scales. It develops an understanding of the WSF as an epistemic project that seeks both to affirm the existence and validity of multiple knowledges and to facilitate convergence between them, and considers how different communication practices might further this project.

Based on ethnographic research carried out in connection with the WSF 2009 in Belém, complemented by fieldwork at other social forums, the thesis is structured as a series of case studies of different communication practices, ranging from efforts to engage with conventional mass media to various initiatives that seek to strengthen movement-based communication infrastructures and enable WSF participants to communicate on their own terms. These demonstrate that there are many different approaches to making the WSF 'public' and 'global', which beyond facilitating the circulation of media content also involve mobilising new actors to participate in media production and generating a sense of identification with a global WSF process. They also show that mediated communication can contribute to knowledge production not only by facilitating information sharing, but also through the more subtle processes of empowerment, network-building, and translation across difference it can stimulate when embedded in movement dynamics.

# Contents

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>8</b>
OUTLINE OF THE THESIS .....	19
<b>1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: CONCEPTUALISING THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN THE WSF.....</b>	<b>24</b>
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND MEDIATED COMMUNICATION .....	26
PUBLICS AND THE EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL OF THE WSF .....	37
MAKING THE WSF PUBLIC .....	45
THE WSF AS AN EPISTEMIC PROJECT.....	51
PROBLEMATISING GLOBALITY.....	63
CONCLUSION.....	73
<b>2. MOBILE POSITIONING AND SITUATED CONVERSATIONS: RESEARCHING MULTI-SCALAR COMMUNICATION PRACTICES .....</b>	<b>76</b>
ETHNOGRAPHY AS METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK .....	78
THE RESEARCH PROCESS.....	82
DOING MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY .....	86
RESEARCH AS SITUATED CONVERSATION .....	93
POWER, IDENTITY, POSITIONING: MY ROLE AS RESEARCHER .....	99
ANALYSIS, WRITING, AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE TEXT .....	104
CONCLUSION.....	107
<b>3. BREAKING THROUGH THE FISSURES? COMMUNICATING THE WSF THROUGH MASS MEDIA.....</b>	<b>109</b>
THE WSF AND ‘MAINSTREAM’ MEDIA .....	112
CAN A SPACE SPEAK? WHO COMMUNICATES THE WSF?.....	115
WHAT’S THE STORY? FRAMING THE FORUM .....	124
COMMUNICATING THE BELÉM WSF .....	129
CONCLUSION.....	137
<b>4. MAKING THE WSF PUBLIC: PROMISES AND CONTRADICTIONS OF OPENNESS .....</b>	<b>140</b>
LIVE MEMORY AND VIRTUAL OPEN SPACES: EXTENDING THE WSF IN TIME AND SPACE.....	143
SELF-ORGANISED DOCUMENTATION: AUTONOMY, PLURALITY, AND CONVERGENCE.....	150
‘THAT IS THE WSF, THIS IS THE OPEN WSF’: TRANSPARENCY, INCLUSION, EMERGENCE.....	153
LIMITATIONS OF OPEN SPACE .....	160
CONCLUSION.....	167
<b>5. ‘ANOTHER COMMUNICATION IS POSSIBLE!’ ALTERNATIVE MEDIA AND THE CONCEPT OF SHARED COMMUNICATION .....</b>	<b>170</b>
DEVELOPING A POLITICS AND CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION FOR THE WSF.....	173
WHO IS THE PUBLIC? DISSEMINATING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA COVERAGE .....	180
‘COMMUNICATE TO MOBILISE TO COMMUNICATE...’ EXTENDING THE WSF PUBLIC THROUGH MOVEMENT-BUILDING.....	186
AFFIRMING MULTIPLE TRUTHS, ENCOURAGING TRANSLATION .....	191
THE DIFFICULT WORK OF TRANSLATION .....	196

CONCLUSION.....	203
<b>6. STARTING FROM THE AMAZON: COMMUNICATION AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE.....</b>	<b>206</b>
CONSTRUCTING PLACE-BASED PUBLICS: COMMUNITY RADIOS IN BELÉM.....	209
ENCOUNTERING THE WSF .....	213
TEMPORARY OPENINGS: THE RÁDIO DOS POVOS .....	217
LONGER-TERM STRATEGIES: CONSTRUCTING A REGIONAL COUNTERPUBLIC IN THE PAN-AMAZON.....	224
CONCLUSION.....	233
<b>7. GRASSROOTING THE WSF PUBLIC: DECENTRALISED GLOBALITY AND THE AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE OF ENCOUNTER.....</b>	<b>236</b>
DECENTRALISING THE WSF: THE GLOBAL DAY OF ACTION 2008 .....	238
EXPANDING THE WSF: BELÉM EXPANDED.....	244
CONNECTING THE PERIPHERIES: THE EXPANDED SOCIAL FORUM OF THE PERIPHERIES .....	253
CONCLUSION.....	264
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>266</b>
MAKING GLOBAL PUBLICS?.....	266
COMMUNICATION AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION .....	274
POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	279
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>282</b>

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## Introduction

*Will the movements that started to gain visibility in the mid-1990s result in the sustained construction of imaginaries for alternative modernities and perhaps even non-Eurocentric modes of analysis of social life? The answer to this question will depend on the character these social movements adopt and on the extent to which they might be able to generate their own 'sustainable' structures for the production of knowledge (Escobar, 2007a: 276).*

The world needs new imaginaries. The multiple crises that currently are unfolding across the globe have thrown into sharp relief the inadequacies of the existing economic and political order and the necessity of constructing alternatives. Global capitalism, underpinned by the political and epistemological imaginaries of Western modernity, is cracking at the seams, and it is becoming increasingly clear that its promises to deliver economic progress and political stability to the world are illusory. The myriad of alter-globalisation<sup>1</sup> social movements that have emerged around the world in the last two decades have played a fundamental role in delegitimising the neoliberal order, and between them have a wealth of knowledge and ideas about how to bring about a more just world. However, the capacity of these movements to construct alternative imaginaries that might enable us to transcend capitalism is, as Escobar suggests, an open question, the answer to which depends on their ability to support sustained, autonomous processes of knowledge production and – I would add – converge around shared imaginaries. Though numerous possibilities are emerging, coherent alternatives to capitalism – shared visions capable of transforming the way the majority of people around the world think, feel, and act – have yet to be articulated fully.

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<sup>1</sup> Such movements are often referred to as 'global social justice movements' or 'anti-globalisation movements'. I prefer the term alter-globalisation because it emphasises (1) that such movements are not against globalisation *per se*, and (2) that they are concerned with developing alternative political imaginaries.

The World Social Forum (WSF),<sup>2</sup> which appeared on the world stage in 2001 proclaiming that ‘another world is possible’, is arguably one of the most promising sites from which such shared imaginaries may emerge. Originally conceived as a counterpoint to the elite World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, the WSF regularly gathers tens of thousands of alter-globalisation activists from around the world to debate and elaborate alternatives to neoliberal globalisation. Founded at an historical conjuncture in which the Left was in a state of crisis and fragmentation, but which had also seen the emergence of a multiplicity of movements against neoliberal globalisation, the WSF can be understood as an attempt to make visible and facilitate convergence among these diverse currents in order to develop new analyses and visions. Heralded as expressive of a new political logic and signalling the rise of a ‘global Left’ (Santos, 2006b), the WSF has increasingly gained recognition as an important social and political phenomenon. It also has been the subject of political and theoretical controversy regarding its character and significance, giving rise to a rapidly expanding, if somewhat eclectic, field of literature.

With this thesis, I seek to contribute to the academic literature on social forums by offering an in-depth empirical analysis of an aspect which has received little systematic attention: the character and role of media and communication in the WSF. The lack of attention to communication in otherwise broad-ranging writings on the WSF is surprising, considering on the one hand the prominent place that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have occupied in theorisations of global social movements, and, on the other, the growing academic interest in radical and alternative media over the last decade. There are notable exceptions: Kavada (2005, 2007, 2009) analyses the role of the internet and email communication in the organising process and construction of

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis, I use ‘WSF’ and ‘the Forum’ (capitalised) to denote the World Social Forum ‘in general’. When referring to specific social forum events, I use ‘forum’ (non-capitalised) or the relevant abbreviation followed by a specific year, e.g. ‘WSF 2009’.

collective identities in the European Social Forum (ESF); Juris, Caruso and Mosca (2008) discuss the politics of free software in social forums and outline different communication initiatives; Juris (2008a: Ch. 7) gives an overview of technological infrastructure and media projects in the WSF; Mosca et al. (2009) analyse the ways in which the ESF has been communicated to participants and external audiences; Anand (2005) highlights the importance of alternative media to the WSF; and Haralanova and Palmieri (2007) provide a brief case study of a team of feminist reporters that covered various social forums. However, in-depth analyses of the use and significance of mediated communication in the WSF process are conspicuous by their absence.

Why has communication not occupied a more central place in writings on social forums? One possible reason might be that, despite the WSF frequently being referred to as a *process*, many accounts remain rooted in an understanding of it as constituted by a series of time- and place-bound *events*, which makes the physical space of the forum and the face-to-face interactions that take place within it the main objects of concern. If the WSF is conceived primarily as a component of broader movement networks, as a temporally and physically bounded space in which movements periodically converge, mediated communication might be considered an important aspect of networked movements in general, but not something that requires specific attention in the context of the WSF. However, I believe it is critical to distinguish analytically between the WSF and its constituent movements. As Conway argues, '[t]he WSF is both more than and different from the sum of these movements; and the movements are more than and different from the sum of their practices vis-à-vis the WSF': both have 'their own particular and evolving praxes' (2008b: 74). On such a reading, it becomes crucial to consider the specific dynamics of the WSF, including its communication practices, as important objects of study in their own right.

My study of these communication practices takes as a starting point two broad ways of conceptualising the WSF. One is an

understanding of the WSF as a global process; the other is a conception of social forums as sites for knowledge production. Both were central to how the WSF was conceived by its founders, and both are discernible within a broad range of otherwise divergent analyses.

The idea of the Forum as a global process has had broad currency from the outset. In an important sense, it is precisely the *globality* of the WSF that makes it so new and exciting. Although the formation of transnational movement networks and global gatherings of civil society actors are not new – important precursors to the alter-globalisation movement and WSF include the anti-apartheid movement (Thörn, 2007) and the NGO networks that developed around the UN system in the 1990s (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) – the WSF represents both a quantitative and qualitative shift by virtue of the number and diversity of actors it mobilises. Importantly, as its name suggests, the WSF is also a self-consciously global phenomenon. The Forum’s Charter of Principles, adopted in June 2001 following its first edition in Porto Alegre, is instructive in this respect:

The World Social Forum at Porto Alegre was an event localized in time and place. From now on, in the certainty proclaimed at Porto Alegre that ‘another world is possible’, it becomes a permanent process of seeking and building alternatives, which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it.

The World Social Forum is a world process. All the meetings that are held as part of this process have an international dimension (World Social Forum, 2001b: Articles 2 and 3).

The conception of the WSF as a global process involves both an assertion about its *scale* (the WSF is a ‘world’ process)<sup>3</sup> and a claim about its *temporal* character (it is a ‘permanent process’ rather than a series of separate events). As suggested above, while the WSF frequently is described in such terms, the practical and theoretical implications of this are not always appreciated fully – and this might

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<sup>3</sup> The term ‘world process’ is used in the English translation of the Charter of Principles. In the original Portuguese version (World Social Forum, 2001a: Article 3), the term used is ‘*um processo de caráter mundial*’, which also can be translated as ‘a process of global character’.

help explain the lack of interest in communication. However, if we take seriously the claims of the Charter that the WSF is both *global* and a continuous *process*, a focus on media and communication becomes necessary. Mediated communication is fundamental both to give the social forum process continuity over time, providing the means by which participants may engage in dialogue between forum events, and to extend the geographical reach of the Forum beyond those physically present at any given event.

The issue of knowledge production also has been prominent within discourses around the WSF since its inception. Accounts of its origins typically posit the Forum as part of a narrative detailing the emergence of the alter-globalisation movement, beginning with the Zapatista uprising in 1994 and continuing with the Battle of Seattle in 1999 and subsequent international protest events in the early 2000s (e.g. della Porta et al. 2006; Leite, 2005; J. Smith, Karides et al., 2008). While these events served to consolidate the emerging 'movement of movements' by bringing together a diverse range of actors in the struggle against a common enemy – the agents of neoliberal globalisation – the WSF was conceived as a next step in this struggle, a space in which participants could begin to articulate not only what they were against but what they were for. As Chico Whitaker, one of the Forum's founders, stated, 'over and beyond the demonstrations and mass protests [...] it seemed possible to move on and offer specific proposals, to seek concrete responses to the challenges of building "another world"' (quoted in Leite, 2005: 77).

The impetus to create a space for the development of new ideas, analyses and proposals – in short, the development of new knowledge – was, then, one of the key motivating factors behind the creation of the WSF. This is reflected in the Charter of Principles, which begins by describing the WSF as 'an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action' (World Social Forum, 2001b: Article 1). Echoing such an

understanding, commentators variously have referred to the forum as a 'factory of ideas' (Whitaker, 2008b: 84), an 'emergent learning process' (Sen, 2007), and a 'pedagogical space' (Fisher & Ponniah, 2003: 6).

Together, these two conceptions of the WSF – as a global process and as a site for knowledge production – and the focus on media and communication necessitated by the former, give rise to questions about the relationship between communication and knowledge production. How is mediated communication used to communicate the knowledges of WSF participants beyond the face-to-face interactions that take place at forum events? In what ways might media and communication be implicated in and contribute to processes of knowledge production within and beyond the WSF? The Forum's claim to globality also raises questions about the issue of scale: how, and to what extent, might mediated communication contribute to making the WSF global? What might this notion of globality actually mean? What other scales might be relevant to the communication practices of different actors, and how do these scales relate to the idea of the global?

The key theoretical concept that I employ as a framework for exploring these questions is the notion of *publics*. Loaded with theoretical baggage, this is in many ways a problematic term; however, it is also highly productive as a tool for conceptualising the relationship between mediated communication, knowledge production, and questions of scale. First, because it offers analytical purchase on the common-sense idea of the WSF as a global process. The concept of publics makes it possible to grasp what it might mean to talk about the WSF as a phenomenon that is extended in time and space, and – importantly – draws attention to the role that mediated communication might play in making it 'global' and a 'process'. As I discuss in Chapter 1, various commentators have described the WSF using the language of the public sphere, but without making the connection to media and communication. I suggest that this is

symptomatic of what Barnett (2003) has identified as a broader tendency in democratic theory to conceive of publics in overly concrete and spatial terms. Most accounts are implicitly framed by an understanding of the 'WSF public' as constituted by the actors gathered in the material space of any given edition of the Forum. However, though unquestionably important, the face-to-face interactions that take place at social forums are not necessarily the best starting point for theorising the WSF as a public. Drawing on the work of Barnett (2003) and Warner (2002), I suggest that publics are better conceived as networks of communicative practices; as spheres of discourse constituted through the circulation of discourse. Such an understanding necessitates a focus on mediated communication, and - crucially - means that the notion of publics fruitfully can be applied to the idea of the WSF as a process extended beyond the time-space of particular forum events.

In this thesis, I take the idea of the WSF as a global process - that is, a global public - as a starting point for inquiry rather than as a given. As I discuss in Chapter 1, the WSF has been criticised on many counts for failing to live up to its promise of globality, and questions have been raised about the appropriateness of applying the public sphere concept to the Forum (e.g. Conway & Singh, 2009). My concern, however, is not so much to establish whether the WSF can or should be conceptualised as a global public sphere, as with how organisers and communication activists are trying to *make it public* through their use of mediated communication. Moreover, as suggested above, I am interested in how, and to what extent, communication practices might contribute to making the WSF *global*, not so much in absolute terms as by creating a sense of globality. The question that forms the title of this thesis - 'Making global publics?' - is intended to capture both of these aspects, as well as the possibility that the kind of publics and the sense of globality that are constructed through mediated communication might take many forms.

In exploring how communication practices might contribute to making the WSF 'global' and 'public', I am not primarily interested in their potential to construct a *general* public sphere at the global scale, in the sense of a unified communication space that can act as a counterpoint to state authority. Conceptualising the WSF in such terms is not only theoretically and practically very difficult, it also fails to capture adequately its oppositional character and the challenge it poses to modern political imaginaries (Conway & Singh, 2009). The WSF is better understood as a *counterpublic* (Fraser, 1990), in the sense that it provides a site for the elaboration of alternative discourses and practices that challenge dominant meanings. It is, however, a rather peculiar kind of counterpublic. First, because the WSF itself might be understood as composed of multiple sub-publics; it is therefore perhaps more appropriate to describe it as an overarching counterpublic sphere with the potential to facilitate communication across difference (cf. Conway, 2004a; Fraser, 1990). Second, because the WSF's project cannot adequately be conceived in terms of expanding the boundaries of dominant publics to include marginalised perspectives. Given its claim to globality and its concern to articulate alternative visions for the world, I suggest that it is more relevant to evaluate the WSF's 'success' in terms of its capacity to extend *its own* discursive boundaries. My interest, therefore, is in exploring how the WSF public might be extended through media and communication.

The concept of publics is also useful for thinking about how mediated communication might be implicated in and contribute to processes of knowledge production in the WSF. To do so, I develop an understanding of publics as pedagogical spheres which may enable the production of alternative visions and critical interpretations of social reality – in short, new knowledge (Fraser, 1990; Giroux, 2001; Hernandez, 1997). As highlighted above, the WSF has been conceptualised as a pedagogical space, but such accounts have focused primarily on the material space provided by forum events.

Moreover, such an understanding of the WSF as a space for knowledge production has not been prominent in efforts to theorise it as a public; such debates have tended to revolve around the extent to which the WSF can or should be conceptualised as a global public sphere. In this thesis, I employ an understanding of publics as pedagogical spheres and as communication networks constituted through the circulation of discourse to ask how media and communication might contribute to knowledge production in the WSF process.

In doing so, I develop a conception of the WSF as not just a space for knowledge production but as an *epistemic project*. This draws on an understanding of social movements as knowledge producers and of the WSF itself as a space of radical epistemic plurality. As an epistemic project, the WSF seeks, on the one hand, to affirm the existence and validity of multiple (emergent and subalternised) knowledges and, on the other, to facilitate genuinely democratic processes of articulation between them which do not entail erasing or incorporating difference. As highlighted earlier, what is at stake is the development of urgently needed alternative imaginaries. My concern in this thesis is to explore how the communication practices of forum organisers and communication activists might contribute to this epistemic project and to the development of new imaginaries.

In summary, the aims of this thesis are (1) to conduct a detailed empirical study of communication practices within the WSF; (2) to explore the different ways in which forum organisers and communication activists are trying to make the WSF public through mediated communication, and consider how different communication practices might contribute to extending the WSF public; (3) to examine how different communication practices might contribute to making the WSF global, what such a sense of globality might entail, and how the idea of the global might relate to other scales at which activists operate; and (4) to consider how media and communication

might further the epistemic project of the WSF by making visible the plurality of knowledges that exist within the Forum and facilitating convergence between them.

Primarily exploratory in character, these aims necessitate a research strategy that is able to capture some of the richness and complexity of phenomena that are very much 'in process'. Partly because I explore practices and meanings, partly to avoid imposing a predefined theoretical model at the outset, I have adopted an ethnographic approach. The analysis presented in this thesis is the outcome of detailed empirical research, based on participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis. The main bulk of this research was carried out over a period of five months in Brazil in connection with the WSF 2009 in Belém, complemented by shorter visits to a number of other social forums between October 2008 and February 2011, and participation in online meetings and exchanges. My research design thus combines elements of 'grounded' (Burawoy, 2000), 'multi-sited' (Marcus, 1995), and 'virtual' (Hine, 2000) ethnography. Though multi-faceted, it is, however, a self-consciously *partial* strategy, which recognises both the impossibility and undesirability of total knowledge. The nature of this research project makes it clear that there is no 'ethnographic outside' (Riles, 2000); research therefore becomes a matter of mobile positioning to seek out different vantage points *within* the field. This project is premised on an understanding of research as *situated conversation* – a term I use to conceptualise the knowledge produced in research as a result of the articulation of academic and other forms of knowledge, which though differently situated are not of a fundamentally different order.

Carried out from a position of critical engagement rather than detached objectivity, this project is motivated not only by a concern to fill a theoretical gap, but also by a wish to contribute to political praxis. A better understanding of media and communication should be of relevance to activists and organisers involved in the WSF. The

lack of attention to mediated communication in the WSF process is not just a theoretical issue; communication is also something that, at least until recently, seems to have been low on the agenda within the WSF itself. A key complaint of many communication activists revolves around what they see as the failure of many organisers and members of the Forum's International Council (IC) to understand the significance of communication and devote adequate energies and resources to it. Peter Waterman, labour theorist and prolific commentator on the WSF, has criticised the Forum in a number of articles for its shortcomings in the areas of communication and culture (2003, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

Whereas the movement-in-general has shown, at its best, an almost instinctive feel for the logic of the computer [...], and has expressed itself in the most creative and provocative ways, this is not the case for the WSF. It *uses* the media, culture and cyberspace but it does not think of itself in cultural/communicational terms, nor does it live fully within this increasingly central and infinitely expanding universe (Waterman, 2005a: 76).

Similarly, Juris et al. (2008: 97) point out that although ICTs have played an important role in the organisation of forum events, with websites providing key tools for outreach, archiving, and registration procedures, 'ongoing forum processes have been less directly shaped by the culture and logic of the new ICTs'.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it appears that communication has been considered important in relation to forum *events*, as a means to disseminate information to participants, external audiences, and mass media, but its potential to facilitate ongoing interaction between forum events, and thereby contribute to making the WSF a *process*, has not been fully exploited.

This does not mean that initiatives concerned with stimulating internal and external communication have been absent from the WSF.

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<sup>4</sup> They suggest this might be due to the institutional character of key actors within the WSF (such as NGOs and trade unions), as traditional organisations tend to adapt new technologies to their existing communication practices whereas 'informal actors are more likely to reorganize themselves around such technologies' (Juris et al., 2008: 97; citing Norris, 2001).

Especially in recent years, a number of communication projects have been initiated and developed by members of the IC's Communication Commission as well as other activists and organisers. These have included efforts to engage with mass media, projects concerned with documenting proposals arising from forum meetings, websites to facilitate internal communication among participants, and the use of videoconference technology to connect WSF participants in different geographical locations. Since its inception, the WSF also has been a space for the elaboration of innovative communication practices by alternative media activists who believe that 'another communication is possible'. However, these practices have not always been given the visibility and attention they deserve and their significance has not been widely appreciated.

In part, then, this thesis is motivated by a wish to document some of these communication initiatives and make them better known, both within and beyond the WSF 'universe'. I also hope, by subjecting these communication practices to detailed critical analysis, to contribute to ongoing processes of collective reflection, which are vital to the development of communication strategies and structures conducive to social change. As Escobar suggests in the epigraph to this Introduction, the capacity of contemporary movements to develop much-needed alternative imaginaries will depend on their ability to construct their own 'sustainable structures for knowledge production'. It is a key premise of this thesis that in the 'world-wide, movement-based, multi-scale, and multi-sited cultural process' (Conway, 2008d: 67) that is the WSF, mediated communication must be considered a fundamental component of such structures.

### ***Outline of the thesis***

Chapter 1 develops the theoretical framework that I use to ask questions about the role of mediated communication in the WSF and its relationship to processes of knowledge production. I situate my

research within a broader literature on the relationship of social movements to media and communication, focusing on the role of mediated communication in maintaining and challenging power relations, the problematic relationship of movements to mass media, the potential of the internet and new communication technologies, and the transformative effects of processes of media production highlighted by the literature on alternative and citizens' media. I then develop the understanding of publics that I use to conceptualise the role of media and communication in the WSF, situating this in debates about whether the WSF can or should be theorised as a public sphere. I elaborate the notion of the WSF as an epistemic project, and problematise its claim to globality with reference to questions around knowledge and epistemology, and media and publics.

Chapter 2 develops the methodological framework of the thesis, outlining the rationale for adopting an ethnographic approach. I provide a narrative account of the research process, discuss the epistemological and methodological implications of doing multi-sited ethnography, and develop the notion of research as situated conversation. The chapter considers my position as researcher in relations of power and discusses the process of analysis and writing, highlighting the need to produce locatable knowledge claims.

The subsequent five chapters are organised as case studies of particular kinds of communication practices within the WSF, each of which offers different purchase on my research questions. Chapter 3 considers the possibility of extending the WSF public via conventional mass media. I show that, though difficult to negotiate for all oppositional actors, the movement-media relationship becomes particularly complicated in the case of the WSF. This is partly because of its 'founding principles' of horizontality and respect for diversity as well as the emergent character of the knowledges that circulate within it, and partly because of the difficulties involved in constructing a global public via mass media when such media are predominantly *international* in character. Through a case study of the

communication of the WSF 2009, which illustrates the difficulties involved in adopting a coordinated international media strategy in the context of the WSF, I explore how some of these dynamics manifest themselves in practice. The chapter concludes by suggesting that the WSF might gain more media coverage if it adopts a more coherent communication strategy, but that it is unlikely to succeed in constructing a global WSF public solely through mass media.

Chapter 4 discusses various initiatives implemented by forum organisers in order to document and make publicly available the ideas and proposals of WSF participants beyond the time-space of particular forum events. I show how a particular conception of publicness – associated with ideals of openness, transparency, and free circulation of information – has been conceived as a solution to the challenge of facilitating convergence while adhering to principles of horizontality and respect for diversity, and as a means to fulfil the WSF’s promise of openness. However, though informed by ideals of autonomy and plurality, transparency and inclusion, and a commitment to preventing the hegemonic closure that accompanies consensus formation, these initiatives have suffered in practice from fragmentation and are not always as inclusive as their proponents would like them to be. I suggest this is due partly to contradictions in the ways that the conception of the WSF as an ‘open space’ has been interpreted and implemented in practice, and argue that a more proactive approach is necessary if the WSF is to become truly open and inclusive.

A more explicitly political approach to extending the WSF public can be found in the concept and practice of ‘shared communication’ that has been developed within the Forum by alternative media activists. This is the subject of Chapter 5. Initially conceived as a method for sharing alternative media coverage of social forums, shared communication also has come to signify participatory and collaborative communication practices in which social movements are the protagonists. Shared communication might contribute to

extending the WSF public in two main ways: by facilitating the circulation of alternative media content, and through a movement-building approach that seeks to mobilise new actors to participate in communication and construct networks based on solidarity. I suggest that shared communication might contribute significantly to the epistemic project of the WSF, by enabling social movements to express their own versions of social reality and by creating spaces of sociality that can facilitate translation and convergence. However, as illustrated by examples from the WSF 2009, creating such spaces requires resources, time, and energy, and is sometimes difficult to reconcile with other priorities.

Chapter 6 considers the question of extending the WSF public from the vantage point of localised actors, through a case study of how communication activists in Belém engaged with the WSF 2009 when it arrived in their city. Exploring some of the complexities of the relationship between ‘local’ actors and the ‘global’ WSF process, the chapter shows how these activists – who are engaged in a politics of place based on a deep commitment to their local communities in particular and the Amazon region in general – made use of the WSF in ways that complicate hierarchical conceptions of scale. Though they initially understood their relationship to the WSF in fairly conventional vertical terms, these activists also made innovative use of the WSF to construct a temporary *place-based public* that simultaneously facilitated transnational connections, and to strengthen longer-term efforts to build what might be described as a regional counterpublic in the Pan-Amazon. What emerges from this case study is the importance of place-based actors developing their own public spheres in which to engage in autonomous knowledge production. Far from insular, such publics might simultaneously provide a basis from which to engage with other actors and knowledges, thus facilitating convergence and contributing to extending the WSF public ‘from below’ in ways that do not simply entail the incorporation of ‘local’ actors into ‘global’ civil society.

While chapters 3 to 6 explore the potential of various communication practices as a *means* to extending the WSF public, Chapter 7 considers the significance of communication as an end in itself, by looking at the social meanings attached to the *possibility of being connected* through communication technologies. Examining activists' use of web tools to enable real-time audio-visual connections across geographical distance, the chapter considers how such practices contribute to creating a sense of belonging to a global WSF process. The chapter is structured around three case studies of communication practices, each informed by a vision of a decentralised WSF connected through communication technologies, which might be described as concerned with 'grassrooting' the WSF public. These case studies emphasise the centrality of affect to the construction of globality, and suggest that mediated communication can contribute to extending the WSF public by stimulating activists around the world to identify as part of a global WSF process as much as by facilitating the circulation of discourse and including more actors in the production of such discourses. By extending the 'affective experience of encounter' to actors who are unable to travel to social forums, the practices described in this chapter demonstrate how mediated communication might be used to construct global solidarity.

Together, these five chapters paint a complex picture of communication practices in the WSF and their relationship to processes of knowledge production. My case studies reveal that there are many approaches to making the WSF 'global' and 'public', which beyond facilitating the circulation of media content also involve movement-building and constructing solidarity. They also show that mediated communication can contribute to knowledge production not only by enabling information sharing, but also through the more 'subterranean' processes of empowerment and translation across difference that it can generate when embedded in movements' praxis.

## **1. Theoretical foundations: conceptualising the role and significance of communication in the WSF**

In the decade that has passed since its emergence, the World Social Forum has captured the imagination of countless citizens and theorists around the world. It regularly mobilises tens of thousands to participate in the now biennial world event and has given rise to hundreds of local, national and regional, as well as thematic, social forum events around the globe. It has become the subject of a rapidly expanding body of literature, including a number of edited collections (Blau & Karides, 2009; Fisher & Ponniah, 2003; Sen & Waterman, 2008), special journal issues (Blau & Moncada, 2008; Böhm, Sullivan, & Reyes, 2005; Keraghel & Sen, 2004; Roskos & Willis, 2007; J. Smith & Reese, 2008), and monographs (Leite, 2005; Santos, 2006b; J. Smith, Karides et al., 2008; Whitaker, 2007); in addition to an ever-growing number of articles, book chapters, working papers, and opinion pieces published within and outside of academia. Although commentators disagree on the nature and scope of its significance, there appears to be a broad consensus that the WSF represents something altogether new, and what unites many otherwise divergent analyses is precisely a concern to develop adequate concepts and frameworks for grasping this novelty.

This chapter situates my study in relation to strands of literature on the WSF that are of particular relevance to media and communication, and develops the theoretical rationale for my research questions. The first section establishes the centrality of mediated communication to the dynamics of social movements, as the terrain on which power is established and maintained, and where it might be contested. I highlight the problematic relationship of movements to mass media, consider the democratic potential of the internet and new communication technologies, and examine perspectives on alternative and citizens' media that emphasise the

transformative potential of *processes* of media production. The following section introduces the concept of the public sphere, demonstrating its relevance to the study of movements and their communication practices. I discuss how the concept has been employed in debates about the democratic potential of the WSF and suggest that these have been limited in two key respects: by a tendency to conceptualise the ‘WSF public’ in overly concrete and spatial terms, and by a failure to fully appreciate its character and potential as a counterpublic. I develop an understanding of publics as constituted through the circulation of discourse and of the WSF as a counterpublic that seeks to extend its own boundaries, and argue that this provides a useful starting point for exploring efforts to *make the WSF public*.

The chapter then moves on to elaborate the idea of the WSF as a space for knowledge production, emphasising how it might be conceived in pedagogical terms. I propose that social movements should be conceived as key agents in social processes of knowledge production, and develop an understanding of the WSF as an *epistemic project* that affirms the existence and validity of multiple (subalternised and emergent) knowledges, and seeks to facilitate convergence between them. The last section problematises the WSF’s claim to globality, making it clear that categories of ‘local’ and ‘global’ are never neutral, and emphasising the need to consider how the global relates to other scales that have significance for activists. I show how questions of place and scale arise from the multi-scalar character of the WSF process itself, in the context of debates about knowledge and epistemology, and from perspectives on movements and media, and publics.

Together, the perspectives discussed in this chapter point towards the following broad research questions. How, through the use of mediated communication, are organisers and communication activists trying to make the WSF public? How and to what extent might these communication practices contribute to processes of

knowledge production and to the epistemic project of the WSF? At what scales do communication activists operate, and what conceptions of place and scale are discernible in their use of mediated communication?

### ***Social movements and mediated communication***

Why should it be important to study the relationship between mediated communication and knowledge production in the WSF? Despite the fact that '[c]ommunication and media, both within their ranks and without, play a huge role in movement trajectories' (Downing, 2001: 26), mediated communication until recently has received little systematic attention within social movement theory (De Jong, Shaw, & Stammers, 2005; Downing, 2001; Kavada, 2005, 2007). There are, however, good reasons for making it a central object of enquiry when seeking to understand the dynamics of social movements. This section considers various perspectives on the relationship of movements to mediated communication that are relevant to my research questions.

### **The power to construct social reality**

At a fundamental level, the centrality of mediated communication to the dynamics of social movements has to do with its implication in relations of power. In a thoroughly mediated society, media and communication can be said to constitute the terrain on which power is constituted and maintained, and on which it may be contested. As Melucci (1996) shows, the struggles of contemporary social movements take place primarily in the symbolic realm. He argues that in the information age, social movements become fundamentally communicative in character, as their challenges to the established order manifest themselves primarily as challenges to cultural codes. At the core of social movements' activity is the struggle to recover the

‘power of naming’: to counter the deprivation of control over the construction of meaning which, according to Melucci, is key to contemporary forms of domination (1996: 180-182).

Castells (2009) has theorised the centrality of communication to relations of power through the concept of *communication power*. Building on his previous work (Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998), Castells develops the argument that in the network society, the exercise of power is intrinsically linked to the control of communication networks. While different networks (financial, political, professional, etc.) all have their own specific power relationships, communication networks play a decisive role in the constitution of all others. The ‘programs’ that define the goals and parameters of a network are generated from cultural materials which are ‘processed in society according to how they are represented in the realm of communication’ (Castells, 2009: 45). Consequently, the ability to control or influence communication networks – and the discourses that are generated, diffused, and embodied in human action via these networks – is a key asset in the capacity to ‘program’ any network. While power is multi-dimensional, all networks exercise their power by influencing the human mind through communication networks. Therefore, ‘communication networks are the fundamental networks of power-making in society’ (Castells, 2009: 426).

Dealing with similar dynamics, though developed from a different set of concerns, is Couldry’s concept of *media power* (Couldry, 2000, 2003a; Couldry & Curran, 2003). Concerned primarily with what is ordinarily referred to as ‘the media’ (television, radio and newspapers), Couldry understands media power as ‘the concentration in media institutions of the symbolic power of “constructing reality”’ (2000: 4). Media power refers not primarily to the way in which the media *mediate* other forms of power; rather, ‘the media’s representational power is one of society’s main forces in its own right’ (Couldry & Curran, 2003: 4). Consequently, ‘media power (direct control over the means of media production) is an increasingly

central dimension of power in contemporary societies' (Couldry & Curran, 2003: 4). Couldry is concerned not so much with how particular media texts frame our perceptions of reality as with 'what it means to live in a society dominated by large-scale media institutions' (Couldry, 2000: 6). Operating at the level of social ontology, his model focuses on 'how the media affect what kinds of things become "social facts" and "social realities" at all' (Couldry, 2000: 13). Any theorisation of the media's social impact, therefore, 'must start from their privileged role in *framing* our experiences of the social, and thereby defining what the "reality" of our society is' (Couldry, 2000: 14). Media power rests not only on ownership of media institutions and control over distribution networks; the media have large-scale social effects also because the concentration of symbolic power in media institutions is naturalised and legitimised (Couldry, 2000, 2003b). 'Modern populations have been accustomed to the idea that society's principal stories and images should be told from one place, "the media", and that this "place", while of public importance, is such access to its everyday operations is strictly controlled' (Couldry, 2003a: 42). Media power thus relies on a taken-for-granted division 'between those who make stories and those who consume them' (Couldry, 2003a: 42).

### **Movements and mass media**

One of the ways in which media power manifests itself is in the relationship of social movements to mass media. As a long tradition of media scholarship has asserted, mass media play a significant role in maintaining the hegemony of dominant groups (e.g. Chomsky & Herman, 1988; Gitlin, 1980), promoting 'visions of society that endorse the status quo while silencing, marginalizing, and/or absorbing alternatives and opposition voices' (Ryan, 1991: 7). Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993: 116) have described the relationship between movements and the media as characterised by a

fundamental asymmetry, as '[m]ovements are generally much more dependent on media than the reverse' (cf. Rucht, 2004; Shaw, 2005). In contrast to more institutional actors, movements must struggle to establish standing in the media, 'often at what they regard as serious costs for the message they wish to convey' (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993: 117). Movements seeking to challenge the status quo thus face the 'double burden of the underdog': they have 'more difficulty getting access to the media, and more difficulty getting their views presented without distortion' (Ryan, 1991: 9). The mass media's organisational routines, tendency to rely on established sources, and – not least – criteria of 'newsworthiness' all operate to the disadvantage of social movement actors (De Jong, 2005; Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993; Gitlin, 1980; Rucht, 2004; Ryan, 1991).

In addition to issues of access and framing, the internal diversity of social movements also complicates their relations to the media. In contrast to political parties and organisations formed around particular issues, social movements tend to be loosely formed networks bringing together a wide range of actors and ideas. As Melucci (1996) shows, movements are never already-existing collective actors; the collective identity of a movement is always in construction, something that is achieved to a greater or lesser degree over time (though never fully fixed). The rejection by many contemporary social movements of centralised leadership and simple collective identity frames defies the simplification demanded by mass media discourse (Bennett, 2004). The mass media, which favour groups with recognised leaders and clearly defined messages, routinely neglect or denigrate movements which do not fit these criteria (cf. Gitlin, 1980).

### **The internet and new communication technologies**

If the perspectives outlined above emphasise the entrenched character of media power, literature on the relationship of social

movements to the internet and new communication technologies draws attention to the possibility of challenging it. Much of this literature has focused on the opportunities the internet offers for activists to bypass dominant media and construct their own communication networks.<sup>5</sup> The paradigmatic instance of this has been the Zapatistas' pioneering use of the internet to build transnational solidarity networks. Another much discussed case is the Indymedia network that came to prominence with the Battle of Seattle in 1999 (Atton, 2003, 2004; Brooten & Hadl, 2009; Couldry, 2003a; Coyer, 2005; Downing, 2003; Jones & Martin, 2009; Pickard, 2006; Skinner, Uzelman, Langlois, & Dubois, 2009).

Since Indymedia first pioneered the use of open publishing, the advent of blogs and social media has increased exponentially the possibilities for ordinary citizens as well as movement activists to bypass traditional media. Castells refers to this new form of socialised communication as 'mass self-communication': 'mass' because 'it reaches potentially a global audience', 'self' because 'it is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many' (2007: 248). The rise of mass self-communication 'decisively [increases] the autonomy of communicating subjects vis-à-vis communication corporations, as the users become both senders and receivers of messages' (2009: 4). Giving social movements the chance to enter the public domain from multiple sources, the emergence of mass self-communication increases their chances of effecting social and political change, as '[t]he greater the autonomy of the communicating subject vis-à-vis the controllers of societal communication nodes, the higher the

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<sup>5</sup> This does not mean the role of mass media has disappeared off the agenda. For example, Nash (2008) examines the Make Poverty History campaign in 2005 as a 'campaign which took place not just *through* but *in the media*' (167). Juris (2005d), Cottle (2008), and Leung (2009) discuss the complexities surrounding news media coverage of contemporary forms of protest. Owens and Palmer (2003) and Lester and Hutchins (2009) provide different angles on the relationship between movement activists' online communication and conventional media.

chances for the introduction of messages challenging dominant values and interests in communication networks' (2009: 413).

In such a perspective, new communication technologies can be understood as offering opportunities which previously have not been available for subjugated knowledges to enter the public domain. This has epistemic significance: the use of communication media by oppositional social actors challenges both the truth-status of hegemonic versions of social reality and the idea of absolute truth itself. Atton has argued this point persuasively in relation to alternative media practices, emphasising the potential they offer for audiences to become media producers:

Rather than media production being the province of elite, centralised organisations and institutions, alternative media offer possibilities for individuals to create their own media 'from the periphery'. Such media formations, through their very practice, will tend to critique notions of truth, reality and objectivity that we find at the heart of mainstream media practices (2004: 9).

Also highlighting the democratising potential of alternative media practices and new communication technologies, Couldry (2003a: 45) asserts that it is 'to new hybrid forms of media *consumption-production* that we should look for change, since they would challenge precisely the entrenched division of labor (producer of stories versus consumer of stories) that is the essence of media power'. In brief, the use of communication media by oppositional actors, opportunities for which have increased exponentially with the emergence of the internet, can play a crucial role in making visible epistemic plurality.

New communication technologies also have been heralded as offering unprecedented opportunities for information sharing. 'Like computer hackers, activist-hackers receive, combine, and recombine cultural codes, in this case, political signifiers, freely sharing and circulating information about projects, mobilizations, strategies, tactics, and ideas through global communication networks' (Juris,

2005a: 351). Cleaver (1998, 1999) argues that by enabling movements around the world to share information that stimulates discussion and mobilises solidarity, the internet facilitates the 'circulation of struggle'. In Hardt and Negri's (2006) formulation, the information sharing made possible by the internet is at the heart of the Multitude's potential to develop a common body of knowledge that can provide a basis for resisting Empire.

The internet also has been linked in more general terms to the organisational structures of many contemporary social movements (cf. Kavada, 2007).<sup>6</sup> Its decentralised network structure and capacity to facilitate information sharing has been linked to a broader ethos of openness within contemporary social movements (King, 2004; Nunes, 2005c). The origins of this ethos are often traced to the Free, *Libre* and Open Source Software (FLOSS) movement, whose fluid, decentralised, and open organisational model, based on self-directed action by motivated individuals, has been celebrated as a new paradigm for a number of other areas of human action (cf. Kelty, 2008; King, 2004). In the context of social movement activism, openness forms part of what Juris (2008a: 11) describes as the 'cultural logic of networking': a set of social and cultural dispositions, shaped by the logic of informational capitalism, which orients movement activists towards

- 1) the building of horizontal ties and connections among diverse autonomous elements, (2) the free and open circulation of information, (3) collaboration through decentralized coordination and consensus-based decision making, and (4) self-directed networking.

Discernible in this ethos is a conception of the internet (and the free circulation of information it makes possible) as facilitating more decentralised, horizontal, and democratic forms of politics.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Some go as far as suggesting the alter-globalisation movement owes its very existence to the internet (e.g. Langman, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> The ethos of openness is also prevalent among groups that participate in the WSF; in particular, the wealth of loosely organised, affinity-based, and direct-action orientated

In contrast to such optimistic interpretations of its emancipatory potential, more cautious accounts have stressed that the internet is structured by the same unequal power relationships and exclusions as the social world in general. Atton summarises many of these concerns:

To consider the Internet as an unproblematic force for social change is to ignore the political and economic determinants that shape the technology; it is to pay little attention to how technological 'advances' may be shaped or determined by particular social and cultural elites (corporations, governments); and it is to ignore the obstacles to empowerment that legislation, inequalities of access, limits on media literacy and the real-world situations of disempowerment necessarily place on groups and individuals (2004: 24).

Critics also have argued that while the internet might enable sharing of knowledge it can equally contribute to fragmentation, giving rise to a proliferation of online spaces which are not necessarily connected to one another (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Fenton, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; cf. Habermas, 1998). Furthermore, the quantity of information that is available online, its often disorganised character, and the speed with which it circulates might impede rather than facilitate knowledge production and critical reflection on practice (Fenton, 2008b; S. Wright, 2004). The internet, in short, is only as emancipatory as people make it. 'New media can become the location for counter reflexive political deliberation and activity - but that activity must be organized and planned to be deliberative and democratic' (Fenton, 2006: 235). This raises the question of whether - and, if so, how - knowledge might be managed in social movements (S. Wright, 2004). This is a complex issue: on the one hand, the

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groups that participate in social forums and their related autonomous spaces. As several commentators have noted, the WSF can be characterised as a meeting point for two different political cultures that coexist in uneasy tension (Juris, 2005c, 2008a; Nunes, 2005b; Waterman, 2005a, 2005c). One involves a more traditional and institutional style of politics based on hierarchical structures of representation and centralised leadership, and is associated with political parties, trade unions and large NGOs; the other is associated with autonomous groups that value horizontality, self-organisation, and direct participation (De Angelis, 2004; Nunes, 2005b; Osterweil, 2004a, 2004b).

notion of 'knowledge management' is commonly associated with managerial discourses which are anathema to anti-capitalist movements (S. Wright, 2004); on the other, the widespread problems of fragmentation and information overload suggest that '[l]ike it or not, social movements do need knowledge management' (Waterman, 2005b: 143).

Such criticisms focus attention on the ways in which communication technologies are *used* rather than their intrinsic features. The potential of the internet for facilitating openness, horizontality, and convergence is, then, a matter of empirical investigation rather than something that can be inferred from its formal properties.

### **Alternative and citizens' media**

The use of communication technologies by movements has been a key concern within alternative media studies, a heterogeneous field of research which certainly includes the internet and transnational communication networks, but has been equally interested in more local, grassroots forms of participatory communication involving radio, video, and print media.<sup>8</sup> A central theme in this literature is a concern with social relations, organisational forms, and *processes* of media production as much as with the *content* that is disseminated through such media and its potential to challenge hegemonic discourses. Downing (2001) emphasises how, by practicing participatory and horizontal forms of organisation, radical media prefigure more democratic models of media production. Atton

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<sup>8</sup> Issues of terminology are, as Couldry (2009) shows, contentious within this field, and different terms have been adopted by different authors. Atton (2002; 2004) works with a concept of 'alternative media' which emphasises their organisational form as well as content. Downing, arguing that '[e]verything, at some point, is alternative to something else' (2001: ix) prefers the term 'radical', as it highlights the oppositional character of such media. Rodríguez (2001), meanwhile, uses the term 'citizens' media'. Here, I use the terms alternative and citizens' media to focus attention on the transformative potential of processes of media production. Chapter 5 introduces the concept of 'shared communication' developed by alternative media activists within the WSF.

develops a model of alternative media that 'is as much concerned with how it is organized within its sociocultural context as with its subject matter' (2002: 10). In this perspective, alternative media may not only contribute to social change through the production of oppositional discourses; they are also 'able to enact social change through their own means of production' (Atton, 2002: 18). Typically characterised by a concern with internal democracy and organised in ways that challenge traditional hierarchies, roles, and responsibilities, the transformative impact of alternative media therefore may be located at a number of levels, including social relationships and individual empowerment.

This emphasis on process and empowerment is made explicit by Rodríguez (2001), who argues persuasively that the democratisation of communication is not simply about counter-information. 'It implicates the survival of cultural identities, the expression of marginalized social and cultural symbolic matter, and the growth of subordinate groups in terms of empowerment and self-esteem' (Rodríguez, 2001: xii). Emphasising the transformative impact that participation in media production can have, Rodríguez describes how in numerous media projects that she has observed, people 'who had always and only seen themselves as audiences had to reconstruct their self-perception and social context as they became message producers and senders' (2001: 3). Drawing on Mouffe's understanding of citizenship as enacted by citizens on a day-to-day basis through participation in everyday political practices, Rodríguez proposes the term 'citizens' media' as a means of moving beyond the binary model of opposition implied by 'alternative media'. In this perspective, the significance of such media lies not primarily in their capacity to circulate oppositional messages, but in the way they enable people to express their identities, explore and negotiate differences, and *perform* alternative social relations (see also Rodríguez, 2004, 2009).

Such a conception of citizens' media can be situated within a broader framework of participatory communication or communication for social change, which can be traced back to international debates about the democratisation of communication in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>9</sup> as well as to a long tradition of participatory grassroots media activity in Latin America (Kidd, 2009; Kidd & Rodríguez, 2009). While the idea of participatory communication to a significant degree became 'mainstreamed' through its co-optation by governments, multilateral institutions, and development agencies (Dervin & Huesca, 1997; Riaño, 1994), it has retained currency among community organisers and media activists. Particularly as implemented in the global South, participatory media projects are founded on a framework, 'in which change is linked to *participation*, in all stages of communication, of and by groups that have been historically and persistently marginalized by the mainstream media, national governments, and international development' (Kidd, 2009: 90). Within such communication practices, the emphasis is on individual and collective empowerment, and the transformation of social relations, subjectivities, and cultural codes through participatory production processes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> These debates revolved around the proposal for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), put forward within UNESCO by countries of the global South. The MacBride report published in 1980 (UNESCO, 1980) exposed a scenario of deep inequalities in information flows between the North and South, and proposed a series of solutions to encourage democratisation of communication including national communication policies, South-to-South information channels, and strengthening of grassroots and alternative media. The NWICO movement was ultimately defeated but several of its proposals were taken up by national governments, NGOs, development agencies, and social movements, leading to a widely shared, though differently implemented, concern to involve marginalised populations in communication projects (Kidd, 2009; Kidd & Rodríguez, 2009; Rodríguez, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> For recent examples and discussions of participatory communication practices, see Rodríguez, Kidd, and Stein (2009).

## ***Publics and the emancipatory potential of the WSF***

A key concept in the literature on alternative and citizens' media, which also provides a useful theoretical lens through which to explore communication practices in the WSF, is that of the *public sphere* (and, more specifically, the notion of *counterpublics*). In this section, I discuss the relevance of the concept of publics to the study of movements and media, and discuss how it has been used in the context of debates about the emancipatory potential of the WSF.

### **Publics and counterpublics**

In Habermas's original account (1989) – which remains a ubiquitous reference point even though Habermas himself has made significant revisions to the concept (1996, 2006) – the public sphere is conceived as an openly accessible realm of communicative interaction, in which private persons can come together as a public to engage in debate about issues of common concern. Its key function is to mediate between state and civil society by subjecting state authority to the scrutiny of public opinion and requiring decisions to be made on the basis of unrestricted rational deliberation, in which all citizens can partake, rather than arbitrary authority. The public sphere thus forms the cornerstone of democracy, as the mechanism by which citizens can question state authority, participate in debates, and bring issues to public attention.

Habermas's early model of a general public sphere for rational deliberation has since been extensively criticised for its universalising pretensions and exclusionary character (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Negt & Kluge, 1993; Young, 1990, 2002). Of particular relevance to this thesis is the emphasis that critics have placed on the importance of alternative publics constituted by subordinate groups. Influential in this respect has been Fraser's (1990) concept of *subaltern counterpublics*: 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses,

which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 1990: 67). The emancipatory potential of such counterpublics, according to Fraser, lies in their dual character: they function both as 'spaces of withdrawal and regroupment' and as 'bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics' (Fraser, 1990: 68). Challenging the liberal ideal of a general public sphere by pointing to its exclusionary tendencies, Fraser argues that the coexistence of multiple publics is preferable to a single public, under current conditions of social inequality but also in the hypothetical case of an egalitarian multicultural society. The ideal model envisaged by Fraser is one in which several different – and quite possibly intersecting or overlapping – publics coexist and are complemented by an additional, more comprehensive arena in which participants can deliberate across lines of difference about issues of common concern.

The notion of counterpublics has been taken up widely as a theoretical framework for analysing the communication practices of social movements and subordinate groups (Atton, 2002; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Downing, 2001; Rodríguez et al., 2009). The value of the concept for understanding such practices lies precisely in the dual character that Fraser highlights. On the one hand, the term *counterpublic* emphasises the oppositional character of such publics: it is 'suggestive of a politics that seeks to challenge the dominant public sphere rather than simply be independent from it' (Downey & Fenton, 2003: 193). As Fraser makes clear, a key function of counterpublics is to help expand discursive space, forcing issues that previously were considered private or beyond contestation into the public realm. Insofar as they provide the means through which oppositional discourses may circulate among wider publics, social movement media are central to this process (Downing, 2001).

On the other hand, the notion of counterpublics as 'spaces of withdrawal and regroupment' points towards an understanding of such publics as spheres in which subordinate groups may formulate

alternative discourses and interpretations of social reality in an environment relatively free from external pressures; in short, as spheres for knowledge production. As Atton (2002: 156) suggests, 'the alternative public sphere is an appropriate foundation from which to understand the production and reception of autonomously developed accounts of experience, critiques, information and knowledge'. This second function of counterpublics points towards an understanding of publics as pedagogical spheres. Such an interpretation has been developed by Giroux (2001), who describes the public sphere as 'a specific form of political practice that takes as its central concern the organizing of human experience so as to enable individuals to formulate interpretations of social reality in a critical and emancipatory fashion' (Giroux, 2001: 236). Hernandez (1997) develops this understanding of publics with specific reference to social movements, describing feminist public spheres (though the argument can be extended to other counterpublics) as

spaces of liberatory pedagogical practices in the sense that they offer women - but not exclusively women - the opportunity to come to consciousness in community and articulate their opposition, both in theoretical and pragmatic ways, to oppressive social forms (Hernandez, 1997: 41).

Such a conception of publics as pedagogical spheres resonates strongly with the ethos of participation and empowerment that underpins the alternative and citizens' media discussed above. If pedagogy is understood, along Freirian lines, as concerned with fostering dialogue, critical resistance, and transformation of subjectivities and social relationships, then the grassroots communication practices discussed by Rodríguez and others can certainly be conceived as pedagogical.<sup>11</sup> As I discuss in more detail shortly, such a vision of pedagogy also has been used to engage critically with the notion of the WSF as an 'open space'. Together,

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<sup>11</sup> As Rodríguez (2001: 56) points out, principles of on Freirian critical pedagogy have been central to participatory communication strategies developed in Latin America.

these perspectives raise questions about the potential of mediated communication to construct publics that facilitate knowledge production in the context of the WSF. The dual character of counterpublics provides a useful theoretical lens through which to explore, on the one hand, the capacity of forum organisers and communication activists to intervene in wider publics and challenge dominant discourses, and on the other, the potential of their communication practices to facilitate the kind of pedagogical processes described above. These questions have not, however, been very prominent in debates about the character of the WSF, which have revolved more around the extent to which the Forum itself can or should be conceptualised as a global public sphere.

### **The WSF – a global public sphere?**

At an historical juncture in which neoliberal globalisation has been accompanied by depoliticisation and the exclusion of citizens from participation in global governance, the WSF has been said to constitute ‘an important innovation in political practice that can help democratize national and global politics’ (J. Smith, Kutz-Flamenbaum, & Hausmann, 2009: 41). By offering a space where citizens can participate directly in debates on global issues, it plays ‘a critical role in supporting what might be called a global public sphere’ (J. Smith, 2004: 419), providing ‘an arena for the practice of a democratic form of globalization and a common public space where previously excluded voices can speak and act together to challenge the TINA claim’ (J. Smith, Karides et al., 2008: 13).<sup>12</sup> This in turn provides the foundation for a more democratic global economic and political order: ‘If we are to have a more democratic global system, we need to enable more citizens to become active participants in global policy

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<sup>12</sup> The acronym TINA refers to the claim that There Is No Alternative (to neoliberal globalisation), commonly attributed to Margaret Thatcher.

discussions. Without a global public sphere, there can be no plural discussion of global issues' (J. Smith, Karides et al., 2008: 4). Along similar lines, Fraser (2005: 84-85) has referred to the WSF as a transnational public sphere through which movements and other actors demand inclusion as subjects of global justice, thereby challenging the framing of justice within national boundaries and 'prefiguring the possibility of new institutions of *post-Westphalian democratic justice*' (quoted in Conway & Singh, 2009: 62).

Challenging such accounts, a number of questions have been raised about whether the WSF actually can be characterised in these terms. One set of criticisms has revolved around the extent to which the WSF corresponds to the normative criteria associated with the concept of the public sphere. According to Fraser (1990, 2007), the legitimacy of public opinion rests on two features: *inclusiveness* – the extent to which deliberative processes are accessible to all actors with a stake in their outcome, and *participatory parity* – the degree to which all members are able to participate in debates on an equal footing, regardless of differences in status or power. Though not necessarily using Fraser's terms, commentators have highlighted a number of ways in which social forums fall short of these ideals. These include the formal exclusion from the WSF of political parties, groups involved in armed struggle, and anyone not opposed to neoliberalism (Conway & Singh, 2009; Ylä-Anttila, 2005); structural barriers to participation such as travel costs and visa restrictions (Andretta & Doerr, 2007; Doerr, 2007; Vinthagen, 2009; Ylä-Anttila, 2005); and the failure of social forum activists to make meetings and organisational processes publicly accessible and transparent (della Porta, 2005). Critics also have focused on more subtle mechanisms of exclusion arising from cultural norms, discursive practices, and conventional notions of 'political literacy', which privilege modes of expression favoured by 'white, older, academically educated men

from the North' (Ylä-Anttila, 2005: 438) and prevent more marginal actors from participating effectively (Doerr, 2007; C. Wright, 2005).<sup>13</sup>

While the criticisms outlined above have questioned the extent to which the WSF meets the normative criteria associated with the Habermasian public sphere, another set of questions has revolved around the theoretical appropriateness of applying the concept to the WSF. One set of difficulties relates to the issue of scale. As Fraser has shown, public sphere theory has been rooted in a Westphalian imaginary, 'tacitly [assuming] the frame of a bounded political community with its own territorial state' (2007: 8). It has presupposed the existence of a national media system, a national language, and a common culture. The absence of these features at the global scale raises questions about the extent to which the public sphere concept can be straightforwardly scaled up (Ylä-Anttila, 2005). In particular, problems arise with regards to the Habermasian conception of the public sphere as a counterpart to sovereign state authority. As Fraser (1990, 2007) has argued, the extent to which public opinion is able to influence political decision-making processes – its *political efficacy* – is an important measure of 'actually existing democracy'. However, this principle cannot easily be applied to the WSF, as its participants neither address a commonly shared or recognised sovereignty, nor agree on the desirability of doing so (Conway & Singh, 2009).

Another, more fundamental problem relates to the challenge that the WSF's politics of 'open space' poses to the model of deliberative democracy associated with Habermas's normative theory of the public sphere. Central to this model is the idea that it is

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<sup>13</sup> These concerns resonate strongly with broader debates about the extent to which the WSF fulfils the criteria of openness, horizontality and transparency associated with the notion of 'open space'. Key issues raised in this respect include: the formal exclusions already mentioned (Biccum, 2005); the extent to which the WSF is open to new actors beyond the 'already converted' (Andreotti & Dowling, 2004; Sen, 2004); the exclusion of those who lack financial resources; the domination of the WSF by intellectual elites (Pleyers, 2008; Worth & Buckley, 2009); the privileged background of most forum participants (see for example IBASE, 2006; Santos, 2006b: Ch. 5; J. Smith, Karides et al., 2008: Ch. 3); the lack of transparency and accountability, and existence of informal power structures and hierarchies (Albert, 2008; Pleyers, 2004, 2008).

possible, through reasoned public debate, to arrive at mutual understanding, shared knowledge, and consensus about the common good (cf. Fraser, 1990; C. Wright, 2005). While on the face of it, a number of parallels may be drawn to prevailing conceptions of ‘open space’, including ‘a common faith in the power of language and the possibility of communicability across difference, accompanied by a shared downplaying of incommensurability, conflict and power relations’ (Conway & Singh, 2009: 62; cf. C. Wright, 2005), there are fundamental divergences. The key point at which the WSF exceeds the conceptual limits of the deliberative model is the challenge that the notion of open space poses to the ideal of consensus. Central to the vision of its founders is the Forum’s *non*-deliberative character: it does not take position or issue statements in the name of all its participants. Thus, ‘while the WSF can be readily and productively analysed as a communicative space which is producing *convergence* across difference, it is intentionally not structured to produce *consensus*’ (Conway & Singh, 2009: 71).

The WSF, then, poses a fundamental challenge to the deliberative tradition, which ‘imagines public opinion as formed by processes of inclusive deliberation and eventually reduced to a legitimate general will, in order to then be translated by central institutions into binding, enforceable laws to which all are subject’ (Conway & Singh, 2009: 74). Arising from the recognition that the formation of a general will is always necessarily achieved through the exclusion or incorporation of difference, and therefore never fully ‘legitimate’, the WSF’s challenge to the ideal of consensus points towards an altogether different political imaginary founded on a recognition of irreducible difference and plurality. Sen (2010: 1000) argues that the notion of *emergence* is central to the open space concept, in the sense that it represents a form of organisation that allows ‘a new form of politics, based on principles of self-organisation, open-endedness, indeterminacy, and organic learning and reproduction’. Thus conceived, the notion of open space can be

situated within what Day (2004, 2005) theorises as a broader shift from a 'counter-hegemonic politics of demand' to a 'non-hegemonic politics of the act'. Whereas the former operates according to the 'logic of hegemony' – which dictates that social change can be achieved only through the deployment of universalising hierarchical forms, epitomised by the nation-state – and seeks to ameliorate existing conditions by either influencing or capturing state power, the latter is concerned to 'avoid the generalisation of its own values and forms' (Day, 2004: 720) and seeks to displace and replace the state/corporate system by creating alternative practices and relations. Though a commitment to non-hegemonic politics is far from shared by all the actors that participate in the WSF – indeed, it might be conceived as a site in which these two different currents coexist in uneasy tension – the open space format itself might be conceived as informed by a concern to avoid the 'hegemonic closure' associated with processes of consensus formation.<sup>14</sup>

Together, the critiques outlined above raise questions about the appropriateness of describing the WSF in the language of the public sphere. At least, they suggest that *if* the WSF is a public sphere, it is of a different kind than that envisaged within the Habermasian tradition. While in the face of such theoretical difficulties it might be tempting to abandon the concept of publics altogether, I believe such a move would be premature. As Nash argues, although real developments may not meet the (very demanding) criteria that Fraser attaches to the concept, they 'may nevertheless be important to emancipatory possibilities today' (2007: 53). Instead of interrogating the extent to which the WSF fits within a particular theoretical framework, the question may be turned on its head to ask what the theoretical implications and emancipatory possibilities of the practices of WSF activists might be. As Mahony,

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<sup>14</sup> Though, as Caruso (2008) shows, the notion of open space is often mobilised strategically to disguise or sidestep issues of power and conflict within the WSF.

Newman and Barnett argue, new communication technologies, combined with shifts in the political landscape, have prompted the emergence of 'new forms of publicness and new forms of public action' (2010: 2). Rather than evaluating such emergent formations using pre-existing models, it is necessary to 'attend closely to the events, practices and processes through which publics come into view, sustain themselves over time and extend themselves over space' (Mahony et al., 2010: 9). In this thesis, I attempt to do just that in relation to the WSF. However, my concern is not so much to establish an authoritative account of what kind of public the WSF as a whole *is*, as to explore the different ways in which communication activists and forum organisers are trying to *make it public* through the use of mediated communication and how such communication practices might be implicated in processes of knowledge production.

### ***Making the WSF public***

In order to fully appreciate the significance of and challenges involved in efforts by organisers and communication activists to *make* the WSF public, it is necessary to move beyond what I see as two key limitations in the debates outlined above. The first is a tendency to conceptualise the 'WSF public' in overly concrete and spatial terms; the second a failure to appreciate fully its potential as a *counterpublic*.

The first limitation is apparent in the lack of attention to media and communication in debates about the WSF's character as a public. Although, as Thompson (1995) reminds us, publicness in complex societies is necessarily mediated in character, media and communication are practically absent from attempts to theorise the WSF as a public. Most accounts appear to be framed by an understanding of the WSF as a time- and place-bound event (or series of events); consequently, the 'WSF public' is reduced to the individuals and groups that are present in the material space of any

given edition of the Forum and the face-to-face interactions that take place between them. A kind of giant, transnational salon or coffee house, to draw the analogy to Habermas.<sup>15</sup>

While the importance of the face-to-face communication enabled by the WSF hardly can be overstated, it is not necessarily the most appropriate starting point for theorising the WSF as a public. As Barnett (2003: 60) argues, ‘the concept of the public is not best understood as a synonym for social totality or a collective actor. Nor should it be immediately understood as referring to particular public spaces of bounded social interaction’. Drawing on a deconstructionist critique of the idea of representation as the transparent representation of the pre-constituted interests of a unitary subject, Barnett explains that ‘[t]he public cannot represent itself, make itself present, because it is not a unitary subject waiting to be represented. It is a figure *par excellence*, only ever spoken for, instantiated in different guises in different contexts’ (2003: 23). Publics should neither be conceived as actors or spaces, nor their straightforward representation through mediated communication, but as ‘more or less durable networks of communication’ (Barnett, 2003: 9) brought into existence by the acts of representation that constitute them. Highlighting the open-ended character of democratic deliberation, Barnett argues that the temporal dimension of publicness is just as

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<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that the WSF should be conceptualised in such terms. The tendency to equate the ‘WSF public’ with the actors gathered in a particular space might be reflective of what Barnett has identified as a broader tendency within democratic theory to privilege ‘material spaces of interpersonal contiguity as the paradigms of democratic publicness’ (2003: 25). What makes it tempting to characterise the WSF in such terms is that it appears to conform to an ideal model of democratic communication as based on temporally and spatially contiguous conversation. An important part of the novelty of the WSF is that it enables face-to-face communication, generally thought of as possible only in very local contexts, at a global scale. As such, it appears to reinstate a more immediate form of democratic communication based on direct participation – in Habermas’ original work associated with the salons and coffee houses of 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe – widely held to have been lost with the consolidation of the modern nation-state as the proper political unit and the consequent necessity for democratic debate to take place through mass media. Because it (at least in principle) enables anyone who wishes to do so to participate directly in face-to-face conversations about issues of common concern to a global polity, there is an implicit sense in debates around the democratic potential of the WSF that it redeems, or should redeem, this ‘originary’ ideal of democratic publicness.

important as the spatial. 'The consideration of temporality leads to a recognition of the extent to which public space is constituted as a network of communicative practices, such as printing, publishing, broadcasting, reading, writing, watching, performing and listening' (Barnett, 2003: 25). Similarly, Warner (2002: 67) conceives of publics as 'space[s] of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself'.

Such a conception begins to draw attention away from the physical space of the WSF towards the way in which publics might be constituted through the communication practices of activists and organisers. As Downing argues, if the public sphere is not conceptualised primarily as a space or *agora*, but in terms of the activity within particular groups or realms, 'then surely the essence of what is being pin-pointed in the terminology of *Öffentlichkeit*/public sphere is information, communication, debate, media - public conversation on issues of moment' (2001: 29-30).

Shifting the focus towards mediated communication and the circulation of discourse does not mean that the face-to-face interactions that take place at social forums are unimportant. Rather than replace an interest in publics constituted through physical contiguity with an exclusive focus on disembodied discourse, the understanding developed above allows us to reconceptualise the public formed within the material space of any given social forum as just one instantiation of the WSF public rather than its essence. This involves moving away from a sharp dichotomy between face-to-face and mediated communication. An interesting question then becomes: how might these different instantiations of the WSF public - co-present and 'virtual' - relate to and intersect with one another?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> As will become apparent, face-to-face interactions are also accorded considerable importance by communication activists. Chapter 5 shows how the production of alternative media content becomes the occasion for creating spaces of sociality that have the potential to enable processes of translation between differently situated practices and knowledges. Chapter 7 explores activists' use of videoconference technology to replicate the face-to-face interactions that take place at social forums - the affective experience of

The second limitation in debates about whether the WSF can be characterised as a public sphere is their tendency to revolve around whether or not it meets the criteria associated with the idea of a *general* public sphere. Commentators thus have focused on its degree of inclusiveness, the quality of the communication that takes place within it, and the problems involved in scaling up the public sphere concept from its implicit national framing to the global scale. While the first two criteria remain strongly relevant to the WSF's emancipatory potential – and, as I will show, are high on the agenda of many communication activists – its oppositional character and the deep critique of modern political imaginaries developed by many of its participants raise questions about the appropriateness of incorporating it within a deliberative framework (Conway & Singh, 2009). As many commentators have done in passing, I believe the WSF might be described more accurately as a counterpublic (e.g. Conway, 2004a; Juris, 2008a; Ylä-Anttila, 2005).<sup>17</sup>

Taking the counterpublic character of the WSF as a starting point makes it possible to step back from the criteria of consensus formation and efficacy attached to the notion of a general public sphere, and consider instead whether the WSF in general and the practices of communication activists in particular have other qualities that are more pertinent to their emancipatory possibilities. As suggested earlier, the dual character of counterpublics provides a useful conceptual framework for exploring, on the one hand, the capacity of WSF organisers and communication activists to intervene in wider publics and challenge dominant discourses, and on the other, the possibility of constructing public spheres for the elaboration of alternative discourses, practices, and knowledges.

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the encounter – a practice which I argue functions simultaneously to constitute participants as members of a global WSF public.

<sup>17</sup> J. Smith, Karides et al. (2008) also use the term 'transnational counterpublic', but in my opinion their description of the WSF is closer to the notion of a general public sphere.

The WSF is, however, a rather peculiar kind of counterpublic. It is common to think of counterpublics as constituted by members of specific subordinate groups and associate them with the 'identity politics' of such groups. This is not to suggest that the concept of counterpublics is essentialist; as Warner makes clear, '[t]he subordinate status of a counterpublic does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed' (2002: 121). Like all publics – in contrast to communities or social classes – counterpublics are by definition in principle open to anyone; the existence of a public is contingent on its members' activity, not their categorical classification (Warner, 2002). Nonetheless, counterpublics are generally assumed to be self-identified as different or separate from the general public and involve some sense of collective identification. Though counterpublics (like all publics) come into being through an address to infinite strangers, they address these strangers as being not just anybody (Warner, 2002). In other words, their membership, though never fixed by formal boundaries, is limited by the reach of their discourse.

The WSF differs from such a conception of counterpublics in important respects. Most obviously, given the linguistic, cultural, social, and political diversity of its participants, the WSF is perhaps better understood as a 'space of spaces' (Conway, 2008a) than a single undifferentiated public sphere. In this sense, the WSF might be conceived as made up of several sub-publics constituted by the broad movement sectors that operate within it, while also providing an overarching communicative sphere in which these sub-publics may overlap and interact. In other words, it might be conceived as a 'more comprehensive, cross-cultural political space that is allowing for the social learning and multicultural literacy that Fraser thinks are necessary preconditions for more inclusive processes and spheres of democratic deliberation' (Conway, 2004a: 377). Following this line of reasoning, the potential of the WSF lies in its ability to facilitate

exchange and convergence between its different sub-publics, while allowing them to retain their specificity.

Such an understanding, however, comes very close to a normative conception of a general public sphere along the lines of the overarching public sphere envisaged by Fraser (1990). Herein lies the peculiar character of the WSF: it is both a counterpublic, in the sense that it is oppositional, *and* it prefigures the kind of general public sphere that many activists and democratic theorists would like to see. In this respect it challenges another, related, assumption about counterpublics: that their 'success' is to be measured in terms of their ability to influence general public opinion. That is, the democratic potential of counterpublics tends to be conceptualised in terms of their capacity to expand the discursive boundaries of the general public sphere to include the issues, identities, and needs of subordinate groups (e.g. Barnett, 2003: 79; Dahlberg, 2007; Fraser, 1990). While the WSF seeks to challenge hegemonic discourses, it is not clear that its project can be adequately conceptualised in terms of expanding the boundaries of dominant publics. Obviously, inclusion in dominant publics at different scales is an important goal for many of the actors that operate within the WSF, and the Forum undoubtedly serves as an important arena for subordinate groups to seek visibility and recognition. However, if we consider the WSF as a whole it might be more pertinent to evaluate its 'success' in terms of its capacity to extend *its own* discursive boundaries and become another kind of general public.

One of the key questions that I explore in this thesis is, therefore, how are WSF communication activists and organisers trying to *make* the WSF public using mediated forms of communication? My exploration proceeds from two key premises. The first is the understanding developed above of publics as spheres for the

circulation of discourse constituted by discourse.<sup>18</sup> The second is an understanding of the WSF as a particular kind of counterpublic, itself composed of multiple sub-publics, which is not simply oriented towards inclusion in dominant public spheres but rather should be evaluated in terms of its capacity to extend its own discursive boundaries. These two premises, combined with a focus on the ways in which activists and organisers *use* mediated communication, give rise to the following subsidiary questions. First, how and to what extent might mediated communication contribute to establishing connections between the multiple sub-publics of the WSF? The WSF's status as a 'space of spaces' does not by itself guarantee that such connections will be made; this depends, crucially, on communication across lines of difference (cf. Downey & Fenton, 2003). Second, how and to what extent might the communication practices of activists and organisers contribute to extending the counterpublic of the WSF and realising its global ambition?

### ***The WSF as an epistemic project***

Recalling the conception of publics as pedagogical spheres developed earlier, one way to grasp the significance of efforts to make the WSF public is to consider its potential as an *epistemic project*. As highlighted in the Introduction, the WSF has been conceptualised from the outset as a space for knowledge production. In this section, I explore the significance of this claim in more detail and develop an understanding of the WSF as an epistemic project that affirms the existence and validity of multiple knowledges and seeks to facilitate convergence between them.

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<sup>18</sup> The concept of publics as constituted through the circulation of discourse might suggest a primary concern with media *texts*. However, my interest is first and foremost in the various ways in which communication activists try to establish conditions for the circulation of discourse. This involves implementing technological infrastructures to enable flows of communication but also constructing interpersonal and inter-movement networks and forms of sociality that make possible such communication.

## **The WSF as a space for knowledge production**

The most obvious way to conceptualise the WSF as a space for knowledge production is perhaps as a 'space of expertise' (Pleyers, 2010: 114). The brainchild of prominent activist-scholars, the Forum was 'initially conceived as a conference for experts and intellectuals' (Pleyers, 2010: 149). Counterposed to the World Economic Forum, an important objective of the WSF was to gather a left-wing 'counter-elite' to develop alternative analyses of global economic and political issues. In the first three editions of the WSF many activities were organised centrally, and the official programme built up around large plenary sessions with prominent intellectuals addressing mostly passive audiences. Following criticisms of its hierarchical and vanguardist character, the format of the Forum gradually changed to give more prominence to activities organised by participants. Nonetheless, intellectuals have retained a prominent position. Almost half of the members of the IC are activist-scholars (Pleyers, 2008) and around ten per cent of 'regular' WSF participants have postgraduate degrees (Vinthagen, 2009: 142). On such a reading, the WSF can be seen as expressive of a broader trend within the alter-globalisation movement which is centred on abstract theorisation and expertise (Pleyers, 2010). Social forums provide occasions for experts to meet and elaborate their analyses of global economic and political issues, and for 'rank-and-file' activists to learn from such experts.

However, while the WSF clearly has an important role in enabling the production and circulation of 'expert' knowledge, it also can be conceived more broadly as a 'pedagogical and political space' (Fisher & Ponniah, 2003: 6). Several commentators have sought to theorise the WSF in such terms, taking the idea of open space as a starting point but wanting to move beyond idealised conceptions of a 'decentralised space where power relations are non-existent or neutralised' (Andreotti & Dowling, 2004: 606; cf. Biccum, 2005;

Conway, 2008a, 2008b; C. Wright, 2005). Such theorisations recognise that the WSF is marked by power struggles and hierarchies, but that it also is highly productive, enabling communication across previously unbridged and unrecognised differences (Conway, 2008a: 1). A pedagogical perspective has thus been employed as a critique of the actually existing 'open space' of the WSF and to highlight its potential to enable more dialogic forms of engagement (Andreotti, 2005; Andreotti & Dowling, 2004).

Parallels have been noted between the ethos of open space and the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1972, 1974), including an emphasis on non-hierarchical and dialogic processes of learning (e.g. C. Wright, 2005: 411) and the potential of the WSF to foster critical resistance to the oppressive forces of neoliberal globalisation (Andreotti & Dowling, 2004; Olivers, 2004). Central to such pedagogical visions of the WSF is an emphasis on the transformative potential of the encounters across difference that it enables. Difference, in this perspective, 'is something essential to transform and broaden perceptions in a process where cross-fertilisation or "contamination" may affect participants at ontological and epistemological levels: transforming the ways one sees the nature of reality, being, and knowledge' (Andreotti & Dowling, 2004: 609). While such transformative effects by no means are guaranteed by the 'open space' itself – commentators emphasise the need for *decolonisation* of knowledge and subjectivities (Andreotti & Dowling, 2004; Conway, 2008a) and for more powerful actors to unlearn their privilege (C. Wright, 2005) – the WSF has the potential to facilitate such pedagogical processes.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A similar vision can be found in the cultural politics practised by actors involved in the autonomous spaces that operate at the margins of 'official' social forum events, such as the Intercontinental Youth Camp (see Nunes, 2005a; Paz de Oliveira, 2005) and the various autonomous spaces associated with the European Social Forum (De Angelis, 2004; Juris, 2005c; Nunes, 2005b). Counterposed to what activists see as the more hierarchical forms of political organisation practiced by dominant actors within the WSF, such autonomous spaces are expressive of a 'cultural logic of networking' (Juris, 2005a, 2005c, 2008a) that embodies principles of horizontality, self-organisation, and direct

## Movements as knowledge producers

The WSF's character as a space for knowledge production also can be appreciated by considering social movements' character as knowledge producers. The issue of knowledge is brought to prominence by the *prefigurative politics* practiced by many contemporary movements, which are concerned with creating concrete alternatives in the present rather than appealing to state authority or waiting for a future utopia brought about by revolution (Day, 2004, 2005; Holloway, 2002; Lacey, 2005; McDonald, 2002, 2006; Rioufol, 2004). Such prefigurative politics – 'modes of organisation that deliberately demonstrate the world you want to create' (Grubacic, 2004: 37) – are central also to the practice of many WSF participants, and social forums provide important laboratories for experimenting with, and sharing knowledge about, alternative practices.

Expressive of a broader shift in how the relationship between theory and practice is conceptualised within emancipatory movements,<sup>20</sup> the notion of prefigurative politics draws attention to the fundamental role played by social movements in the production of new knowledge. If knowledge about how to change the world does not come primarily from existing theory but is a matter of

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participation (De Angelis, 2004; Nunes, 2005b; Osterweil, 2004a, 2004b). A key aim of this 'cultural politics of autonomous space' (Juris, 2005c) is to practice alternative modes of social organisation which enable learning through encounters with others and contribute to the production of new subjectivities – different ways of being and knowing that are necessary for 'another world' to be possible (De Angelis, 2004; Osterweil, 2004a).

<sup>20</sup> Within the 'old left' – especially among more dogmatic adherents of Marxism – the relationship between the two tended to be conceived in hierarchical terms, with political practice emanating from theory. However, historical developments such as the collapse of communist regimes and emergence of non-class movements, combined with critiques from feminist, postcolonial and poststructuralist theorists, have profoundly challenged the emancipatory narratives of the traditional left. The idea that theory can provide a blueprint for political practice was also challenged by the new social movements of the 1960s and 70s, which valued experiential and practical knowledge developed within movement spaces (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991; Wainwright, 1994).

experimenting with and reflecting on alternative practices, then social movements must be seen as privileged agents in broader social processes of knowledge production. Such an understanding has been developed by Eyerman and Jamison (1991), who contend that movements should be understood in terms of their *cognitive praxis*: the collective processes of knowledge production through which the identity of a movement is articulated. They suggest that the significance of a social movement lies in the historical project it articulates at the level of ideas. Studying movements as cognitive praxis means focusing not primarily on their concrete demands in the present, but adopting a longer-term perspective and thinking about the contribution they make to human knowledge and the civilisational paradigms that guide human action.

Understanding social movements as cognitive praxis does not mean ignoring their practical action and often pragmatic orientation. Rather, it enables us to conceptualise such features as *also* involving knowledge production – an understanding that disappears from view if the knowledge production of social movements is conceived narrowly in terms of expertise (cf. Pleyers, 2010). Eyerman and Jamison define knowledge in broad terms, as incorporating a movement's worldview and the substantive issues it mobilises around as well as organisational practices and more tacit forms of knowledge. Similarly, Conway (2004b, 2006; see also 2008b) has shown that the knowledge produced by social movements takes many forms, ranging from unreflexive knowledge used and produced in everyday practice, to systematic reflection on movement practices and analytic knowledge about social, political, and economic issues. Such an understanding makes it possible to conceptualise the broad range of activities that social movements engage in as involving knowledge production, and to see the WSF as itself 'a product of the knowledges of the anti-globalization movement' (Conway, 2008b: 73).

## **Affirming epistemic plurality, facilitating convergence**

The conception of movements as knowledge producers points towards an understanding of the WSF as a space of epistemic plurality, in the sense that it brings together a multiplicity of movements with radically different organisational cultures, political imaginaries, and worldviews. The epistemic significance of the WSF has been theorised by Santos (2006b), who conceptualises it as expressive of an 'Epistemology of the South': a manifestation of the plurality of knowledges and epistemic practices that exist in the world. As epistemology of the South, the WSF replaces the 'monocultures' of hegemonic globalisation with 'ecologies' that allow for a multiplicity of knowledges and practices to coexist (Santos, 2006b). It does so by engaging in a twofold operation involving the 'sociology of absences' and the 'sociology of emergences'. The former 'consists of an inquiry that aims to explain that what does not exist is in fact actively produced as non-existent, that is – as a non-credible alternative to what exists' (2006b: 15). It seeks to 'transform impossible into possible objects, absent into present objects, invisible or non-credible subjects into visible and credible subjects' (2006b: 15). The latter 'aims to identify and enlarge the signs of possible future experiences, under the guise of tendencies and latencies that are actively ignored by hegemonic rationality and knowledge' (2006b: 29). It is 'the inquiry into the alternatives that are contained in the horizon of concrete possibilities' (2006b: 31).

The WSF, then, can be seen as a concrete manifestation of an epistemology founded on plurality and irreducible difference. Based on the assertion that 'there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice' (Santos, 2006b: 14), Santos conceives of the WSF as forming part of a struggle to give subalternised knowledges 'equality of opportunity' to participate in pragmatic discussions of alternative criteria for validity, oriented towards the capacity of knowledge to contribute to social emancipation (2006b; cf. Santos, 2007b; Santos,

Nunes, & Meneses, 2007). In this perspective, the WSF represents the possibility of resisting and moving beyond the dynamic of epistemic subalternisation through which neoliberal globalisation, anchored in the knowledge of Western modern science, asserts its hegemony. Santos (2006a) conceptualises this dynamic of epistemic subalternisation using the twin concepts of 'globalised localisms' and 'localised globalisms'. The first refers to 'the process by which a particular phenomenon is successfully globalized' (Santos, 2006a: 396) and achieves hegemonic recognition as universal; the second to 'the specific impact on local conditions produced by transnational practices and imperatives that arise from globalized localisms' (Santos, 2006a: 397). There is no originally global condition, only the 'successful globalization of a particular localism' (Santos, 2006a: 396). Domination, in this perspective, is profoundly epistemic in character: neoliberal globalisation discredits other available forms of knowledge and social experience whilst denying the possibility of future alternatives.<sup>21</sup> By affirming the existence and validity of such knowledges and alternatives, the WSF can challenge both the neoliberal hegemony and the epistemological paradigm that underpins it.

Thus conceived, the WSF can be situated within a broad historical trend that has found its expression in challenges to the hegemony of Eurocentric and masculinist knowledges and worldviews. Intensifying since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, these challenges

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<sup>21</sup> The work of Santos overlaps in significant respects with that of scholars associated with what Escobar (2004a, 2007b) refers to as the Latin American modernity/coloniality research programme: an emergent yet cohesive perspective associated with the work of Dussel (e.g. 2000, 2002), Quijano (e.g. 2000) and Mignolo (e.g. 2000, 2002). Running through this literature is a concern with the cognitive injustice wrought by the universalising pretensions of Western modernity. Coloniality, in this framework, refers to the 'underside' of modernity – 'those subaltern knowledges and cultural practices worldwide that modernity itself shunned, suppressed, made invisible and disqualified' (Escobar, 2004a: 210) – which has existed alongside modernity since the conquest of the Americas and is, fundamentally, constitutive of it (Mignolo, 2000). Highlighting the epistemological dimension of the 'modern/colonial world system', Mignolo (2000) argues that Western expansion since the sixteenth century has involved projecting knowledges and practices originating in the local histories of the West into the world as universal knowledge and global designs.

have come from movements of women, workers, peasants, indigenous peoples, and ethnic and sexual minorities, as well as anti-colonial movements around the world. Profoundly questioning notions of objectivity and universality, such (otherwise extremely diverse) movements have in common the claim they advance that subordinate groups, which traditionally have been denied such a status, also can be subjects of knowledge.

The WSF might be conceived as a continuation of this trend, bringing together and moving forward the knowledge claims of such movements. However, its project consists not only in affirming the existence and validity of multiple knowledges; an important aim also is to facilitate their convergence and articulation. A fundamental question is how this might be achieved without excluding or incorporating marginal and divergent knowledges; in other words, how to facilitate genuinely 'bottom-up' processes of convergence. The WSF's rejection of *pensamientos únicos* applies not just to the neoliberal paradigm but to all forms of monolithic thought, and the open space methodology was conceived by its founders as a counterpoint to the exclusionary tendencies of the 'old Left'. At the same time, given the increasingly urgent need for coherent alternatives that can challenge the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism – a counter-hegemonic project – very few would be content with a vision of the WSF as a space in which to simply let diversity be.

This problematic has been at the centre of what is commonly referred to as the 'space versus movement debate', which revolves around the question of whether the WSF should become more of a 'movement of movements' rather than just a 'space' for such movements to meet (see e.g. Conway, 2005; Kohler, 2005; Marcuse, 2005; Patomaki & Teivainen, 2004; Ponniah, 2005, 2008; Teivainen, 2004; Wallerstein, 2004). According to Whitaker, the most vocal proponent of the open space concept, the WSF is 'only a place, basically a horizontal space' (2008b: 113). It is based on the principle of self-organisation: those who organise social forums are meant

simply to provide a space for participants to organise their own activities (Sen, 2010). In this way, the WSF is meant to function as an ‘incubator’ for new initiatives (Whitaker, 2008b: 113) but without itself becoming a political actor. Critics of this model argue that it has resulted in the creation of nothing more than a ‘talking shop’ (e.g. Worth & Buckley, 2009), and call for the WSF to become more capable of formulating and acting on collective proposals.<sup>22</sup> Defenders of the open space format argue that such a move would destroy the WSF's capacity to attract a diversity of actors, effectively leading to exclusion and stagnation (Whitaker, 2008a, 2008b). Thus far, the conception of the WSF as a space in which participating organisations and movements themselves organise, deliberate, and agree on joint initiatives has prevailed. However, there is a growing consensus among actors involved in the WSF that it should encourage and facilitate convergence, and various initiatives have been implemented with this objective in mind.<sup>23</sup>

How might the issue of convergence be conceptualised in theoretical terms? Santos (2005, 2006b) proposes that articulation between the different actors that participate in the WSF can be facilitated through the work of *translation*: ‘the procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world, both available and possible, as revealed by the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences, without jeopardizing their identity and autonomy’ (2005: 16). For Santos, translation becomes the alternative to a general theory. It is, indeed, the only procedure left once the impossibility and undesirability of such a theory is recognised (2006b: 145). It is precisely the recognition of the partiality and incompleteness of all cultures and knowledges that makes translation

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<sup>22</sup> There have been notable attempts to establish a political programme for the Forum, including the so-called Porto Alegre Manifesto launched in 2005 by a group of nineteen prominent intellectuals and the Bamako Appeal put forward in 2006 by a group of think-tanks and NGOs headed by Egyptian economist Samir Amin and Belgian sociologist François Houtart (see Sen & Kumar, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> I discuss some of these in Chapter 4.

possible (2005: 19). For the work of translation to be genuinely democratic, it has to be premised on a broad consensus that there can be no all-encompassing theory of social transformation; without such a consensus, 'translation is a colonial kind of work, no matter how postcolonial it claims to be' (2006b: 140). Crucial to the work of translation is the creation of 'cosmopolitan contact zones': social fields in which movements and organisations can 'meet and interact to reciprocally evaluate their normative aspirations, their practices and knowledges' (2006b: 141). In this way, translation can turn incommensurability into difference, enabling mutual intelligibility and the elaboration of common ethical and political positions without the need for a general theory (Santos et al., 2007). The aim of translation is to generate new knowledges and practices, founded on plural conceptions of social emancipation, capable of challenging neoliberal globalisation.<sup>24</sup>

The notion of translation points towards a conception of convergence as not just a technical procedure but a fundamentally political process (Santos, 2006b). It makes clear the impossibility of a general theory and the need for alternative paradigms to be constructed on the basis of conversations between differently situated knowledges. In this respect, Santos's framework resonates strongly with the epistemology of multiple standpoints that has been developed by feminist theorists on the basis of the 'epistemic and political practices of the feminist movement' (Campbell, 2004: 12) and experiences in coalition politics (Conway, 2006, 2008b). Premised on a recognition of the socially situated and partial

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<sup>24</sup> Again, parallels can be drawn between Santos and the modernity/coloniality framework. Mignolo (2000), through the notion of the 'colonial difference', theorises the exteriority of modernity as a privileged position for the articulation of new knowledges and epistemological frameworks. The space at the margins of the modern/colonial world system, the colonial difference is the location from where new knowledges critical of the abstract universalism of modernity can be articulated. Mignolo asserts the possibility of new macronarratives built from the perspective of coloniality, arguing that this is not a question of constructing a counterpart to universal history, but of a search for a different logic, 'leaning towards an alternative to totality conceived as a network of local histories and multiple local hegemonies' (2000: 22).

character of all knowledge, the epistemology of multiple standpoints rejects masculinist ideals of objectivity as derived from a 'God's Eye view' from above, and instead asserts the possibility of dialogue between differently situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991).<sup>25</sup> Knowledge production, in this perspective, becomes a matter of critical positioning to enable partial connections and dialogue across difference. Conway (2008b: 85) has described this feminist epistemology as the 'epistemology for "rainbow coalition politics"'. Because coalitions are premised on respect for diversity combined with a practical commitment to solidarity, they enable encounters across difference and dialogue between actors with different standpoints, and as such provide particularly fertile grounds for the production of new knowledge (Conway, 2006, 2008b). Although the WSF is not a coalition, it is 'a site for similar dynamics in terms of movement-based knowledge production and for the emergence of knowledges premised on recognition of diversity and pluralism and on dialogue and solidarity across difference' (Conway, 2008b: 85).

The perspectives discussed above offer analytical purchase on the common-sense understanding of the WSF as a space for reflection, debate, and exchange of ideas and experiences. The notion of translation combined with the understanding of the WSF as expressive of an epistemology of the South offer a suggestive framework for conceptualising the Forum as a site from which shared imaginaries for a post-neoliberal world may emerge. On such a reading, the WSF can be understood not just as a space for knowledge production but as an *epistemic project*, insofar as it asserts the

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<sup>25</sup> The epistemology of multiple standpoints developed from feminist standpoint theory, which despite internal differences has been founded on two key premises: that all knowledge is necessarily situated and partial, always implicated in relations of power, and that subaltern locations may provide insights that are not available from dominant viewpoints (see Harding (2004) for a collection of key texts). While early theorisations (e.g. Hartsock, 1983; D. Smith, 1974) sought to establish the grounds for a privileged standpoint (whether a women's or feminist one), later accounts – prompted by poststructuralist feminists' and queer theorists' critiques of identity politics (e.g. Butler, 1990; Nicholson, 1989; Nicholson & Seidman, 1995) and theories of the intersectionality of oppression (e.g. Hill Collins, 2000) – have been premised on the idea of multiple standpoints.

existence and validity of multiple (subalternised and emergent) knowledges and facilitates translation between them. This is not to say that the WSF's capacity to do so is self-evident. While it readily can be conceived as a space of epistemic plurality, its ability to make visible subalternised and emergent knowledges and facilitate genuinely 'bottom-up' processes of convergence is not a given. As discussed earlier, the Forum has been criticised for its internal hierarchies, lack of inclusiveness, and domination by intellectual elites. Moreover, as Conway points out, '[t]he movements of the WSF are encountering each other on a historically unequal playing field', which means that relations between them are characterised by asymmetries of power across 'North/South, non-indigenous/indigenous, and modern emancipatory/subaltern "other" divides' (2008a: 7). Translation between such movements is therefore a process that depends for its success on their recognition of such power differentials and the impossibility of a general theory. The notion of the WSF as an epistemic project thus has a normative dimension, and is intended to capture its *aspiration* to affirm epistemic plurality and facilitate processes of convergence that do not entail exclusion or incorporation.

My concern in this thesis is to explore how mediated communication might contribute to this epistemic project. While the perspectives outlined above share a broad understanding of knowledge as produced through dialogue and exchange, there is little concern with the role that media and communication might play in such processes. However, if we take seriously the claim that the WSF is a global process a focus on mediated communication becomes necessary. Combined with the conception of publics as pedagogical spheres, the notion of the WSF as an epistemic project gives rise to the following questions: How, and to what extent, might efforts to make the WSF public through the use of mediated communication create conditions for knowledge production? What kinds of knowledge production, and by whom, do different communication

practices and different kinds of publics make possible? How, and to what extent, might the publics that activists and organisers seek to construct make visible the plurality of knowledges that exist within the WSF and facilitate convergence between them?

### ***Problematizing globality***

The final set of questions with which this thesis is concerned relates to the WSF's claim to globality. I have hinted already at the problematic character of this claim in the previous discussion of publics, knowledge, and epistemology; in this section I pull together these various threads and make the complexities of the WSF's global ambition more explicit. I discuss the multi-scalar character of the social forum process, highlighting how claims on the WSF by localised actors raise questions about how its 'globality' is to be defined. I then consider the political and epistemological significance of place, and show that the categories of 'local' and 'global' are never neutral.<sup>26</sup> Finally, I consider how questions about scale arise from perspectives on movements and media, and in relation to the concept of publics.

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<sup>26</sup> The related concepts of place, space, and scale have been the subject of complex theoretical debates in human and political geography, urban theory, and other fields, and it is not within the scope of this thesis to engage with all of these. Such debates have focused on the ways in which place, space, and scale might be conceived as socially constructed through complex political, economic, and discursive processes (Lefebvre, 1991; Marston, 2000; Massey, 1994). Of most relevance to my concerns is perhaps the insight that social movements, as well as states and capital, can contribute to the production of place, space, and scale through their practices and discourses (Conway, 2008c). Matters are further complicated by debates surrounding the impact of mediated communication on how place, space, and scale are perceived and experienced. These have ranged from debates about the delocalising effects of electronic media (Meyrowitz, 1985; Thompson, 1995) and 'time-space compression' in postmodernity (Harvey, 1989) to studies of the media as social processes organised in space (Couldry, 2000) and the complex ways in which media shape and are shaped by experiences of social space (Couldry & McCarthy, 2004). My interest in questions of place and scale arises from a somewhat different set of theoretical concerns, relating to the political and epistemological significance of the terms 'global' and 'local', debates about the public sphere and the scales at which solidarity and political 'community' might be constructed. I am interested, therefore, in the significance that the 'local', 'global' and other scales have for activists and how mediated communication might be used to invoke a sense of globality, attachment to place, or both.

## The WSF as a multi-scalar process

The WSF, as already highlighted, involves a *claim* to globality. The intention indicated by its name aside, the Charter of Principles defines the WSF as a ‘world process’ and it is frequently described in such terms within both activist and academic discourses. As I have shown, however, the accuracy of this description has been questioned by critics who have emphasised various *de facto* exclusions from the supposedly ‘open space’ of the WSF and its far from global reach. While these criticisms are clearly apposite – and the question of inclusiveness absolutely crucial as a normative principle – I believe that rather than simply debating whether or not the WSF lives up to its promise of globality in absolute terms, taking its multi-scalar character as a starting point opens up a different set of questions which may be more fruitfully pursued. As Conway argues,

[t]here is no one World Social Forum process, if by that we mean anything globally unified, coherent and linear, unfolding according to a single logic. As the Social Forum as a particular political form and methodology has diffused across the planet, the WSF is more accurately represented as a world-wide, movement-based, multi-scale, and multi-sited cultural process, constituted by many sub-processes, characterized by great unevenness, but more or less seeking convergence, in loose co-ordination and broad solidarity (2008d: 67).

The multi-scalar character of the WSF is perhaps most evident in the proliferation of local, national and regional social forums, each of which have their own particular dynamics arising from the political culture, actors, and issues of the city, country, or region in which they are held. But issues of place and scale are also pertinent to the global edition of the Forum. As Conway points out, the decision to move the world event from its birthplace in Porto Alegre ‘embodies a recognition that place matters in terms of the global as well as for the place-based processes in the host region’ (2008d: 55). With regards to the latter, the WSF is widely recognised as having an important function in terms of setting in motion dynamics in the place where it is held. Indeed, an aspiration to strengthen civil society in a particular

region is usually an important part of the rationale behind the choice of any given site for the WSF. Organising a social forum is not just a logistical task but a political process that usually involves groups who have never before worked together doing so, intensely and over an extended period of time.<sup>27</sup>

As the WSF has moved to new locations, it has also become clear that the place in which it is held makes a huge difference to its character and dynamics. The WSF 2004 in India, which had significant participation from poor peoples' movements (of Dalits and indigenous peoples) as well as movements of people with disabilities, sexual minorities, and sex workers, is widely recognised as having brought new actors and issues to the fore and transformed the political culture of the Forum (Conway, 2004a, 2004c). The WSF 2009 in Belém put the cultures, practices, and imaginaries of Pan-Amazon and Andean indigenous peoples' movements firmly on the agenda of global civil society, in ways that profoundly challenge modernist emancipatory paradigms. Similarly, the WSF 2011 in Dakar was decisively shaped by African movements and their struggles, and the location of the WSF in Africa was given extra salience by the event's coincidence with the Egyptian revolution.

As the WSF has travelled around the world, it has become a site for claims by various place-based movements, who 'come both demanding and offering recognition, solidarity, and dialogue with the thousands of other movements and groups gathered there' (Conway, 2004a: 375-376). From the Dalits in India to urban slum-dwellers in Nairobi to indigenous peoples in the Amazon, such groups come to the WSF to encounter global civil society, to make their voices heard,

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<sup>27</sup> This can have positive and negative outcomes: the ESF 2008 ended with a significant degree of acrimony as the organising committee was forced to declare bankruptcy, while the WSF 2009 proved vital to giving renewed impetus to the Pan-Amazon Social Forum process which had been dormant for some time, leading to the organisation of the fifth Pan-Amazon Social Forum in 2010.

and assert their right to be present in the space of the Forum (Conway, 2008d).<sup>28</sup>

The participation of local populations in the WSF brings issues of place and scale to the fore, raising the question of ‘which places and scales of activism should be privileged at any particular Forum? [...] how “local” should the world event be? how international? how popular or “grassroots”? how intellectual?’ (Conway, 2008d: 57-58). As Conway points out, ‘international political circuits, including of insurgent civil society, are largely peopled by cosmopolitan elites, urbanized and educated in the terms of Western academia’ (2008d: 58); this is also true of the WSF (cf. Pleyers, 2008). Therefore,

[t]he debate about the status of the local in any world event, i.e., concretely, the presence, role, and status of the local-scale activists of the resident population, unavoidably overlaps with the question of the subaltern in the WSF and, by extension, in world civic politics (Conway, 2008d: 58).

The multi-scalar character of the WSF and the complex ways in which its different scales intersect highlight the need to examine not just the extent to which the WSF fulfils its claim to globality in absolute terms, but also the different scales at which activists operate, how these might be related, and – not least – what this global ambition might mean. Claims on the WSF by ‘local subalterns’ raise the question of how the globality of the WSF is to be defined. Who is to be included in the ‘global’ space of the WSF? What is the relationship between the ‘global’ WSF process and the ‘local’ actors in the places where the biennial world event is held? These questions make it clear that categories like ‘global’ and ‘local’ are not neutral descriptors but fundamentally political and epistemological.

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<sup>28</sup> The participation of local populations repeatedly has been the subject of controversy. In Nairobi, urban slum-dwellers staged a dramatic protest at their exclusion from the WSF; the exclusion of local communities was also an issue in Belém, where residents of the poor urban neighbourhoods which hosted the forum were prevented from attending by high entrance fees and subject to a heavy security presence by Brazilian federal police. In Dakar, apparently having learnt the lesson from previous forums, organisers decided to keep the university campus where the WSF was held completely open.

## **The political and epistemological significance of place**

The issue of scale also arises in the context of questions about knowledge and epistemology. As discussed earlier, claims to globality also tend to involve a claim to universality, and the globalisation (i.e. universalisation) of some knowledges involves relegating others to the status of local and particular. The epistemological frameworks outlined above make it clear that just as there can be no universal knowledge, there can be no global knowledge in the sense of a 'God's Eye view' from above (cf. Haraway, 1991). These insights highlight the need to exercise caution when discussing issues of place and scale; rather than treating the 'local' and 'global' as purely descriptive terms, it is important to interrogate how these categories are produced, what is included in each, and – not least – the hierarchy between them. This also applies in the case of discourses surrounding social movements. As Conway (2008c: 218) points out, the local-global language that commonly is used to talk about transnational movement networks 'fails to problematize what gets labeled local or global and obscures the many other scales of action, their inter-dependence, and mutual constitution'.

The far from neutral character of these categories is highlighted by the asymmetry that has characterised debates about globalisation. As Escobar argues, place often has been marginalised in such debates, which have tended to equate the global with 'space, capital, and the capacity to transform while the local is associated with place, labor, tradition, and hence with what will inevitably give way to more powerful forces' (2008: 30). Within such frameworks, 'local' movements frequently are reduced to, at best, misguided struggles to defend traditional ways of life against modernising forces, or, at worst, anti-modern fundamentalisms. The defence of place, in other words, is conceived as reactionary and parochial (cf. Castells, 1997; Harvey, 1996). In contrast to this privileging of the

global, Escobar develops an understanding of place and the politics of place that many movements engage in as 'key to our understanding of globalization' (2008: 15). This politics of place relies on place-making – cultural-political practices concerned with the production of meaning about a particular geographical territory – as a strategy for the defence of place against the delocalising effects of global capital, but cannot be reduced to mere 'resistance' to global forces (Escobar, 2008).

The politics of place can be seen as an emergent form of politics, a novel political imaginary in that it asserts a logic of difference and possibility that builds on the multiplicity of actions at the level of everyday life. Places are the sites of dynamic cultures, economies, and environments rather than just nodes in a global capitalist system (Escobar, 2008: 67).

Escobar (2007a, 2008) describes the struggles of many contemporary movements as place-based yet transnationalised, involving both the defence of local models of social life and mobilisations involving the construction of coalitions at different geopolitical scales. What is discernible in such practices is an alternative version of globality and what it means to be engaged in global politics. Osterweil (2005) conceptualises this emergent politics as 'place-based globalism' and contrasts it to the 'universalising globalist' perspective that characterises some sectors of the alter-globalisation movement. According to the latter, 'effective resistance to neo-liberal capitalist globalization must come in the form of a united global movement that has moved *beyond* place-based and local struggles to occupy and constitute *an* alternative global space' (Osterweil, 2005: 25). Place-based globalism, by contrast, 'is premised on the belief that globality is itself a manifestation of an exclusionary capitalist logic' (Osterweil, 2005: 27). This position

sees true or qualitative globality as comprised of many nodes, places, interconnections and relations that at no point are totally consolidated into a singular global entity. Instead, in their diffuseness and local rootedness they touch and involve increasingly more parts of the globe (Osterweil, 2005: 26).

In such a perspective, the place-based character of many contemporary movements does not have to equal insularity or backwardness. Rather, it might be conceived in terms of a positive project concerned with the construction of alternative political and epistemological imaginaries; ‘an expanding politics of diversity and recognition that acknowledges the multiplicity of alternative visions, values and world views, and the presence of existing “other worlds”’ (Conway, 2008c: 223). The practices of such movements involve the production of knowledge that is ‘embedded in locality and that is responsive and accountable to place-based constituencies – as opposed to the detached expert knowledge of modernity’ (Escobar, 2007a: 286). This can be understood as what Santos refers to as ‘postmodern knowledge’: ‘knowledge about the conditions of possibility of human action projected into the world from local time-spaces’ (2007a: 36). Such a perspective draws attention to the importance of place – understood both as a particular geographical territory and people’s culturally and historically informed experience of, and engagement with, this territory (cf. Escobar, 2008) – to the elaboration of alternative knowledge projects. Conceptualised in epistemological terms, place becomes central to any understanding of what ‘knowledge from below’ might mean in a globalised world. Consequently, the creation of contact zones for translation (Santos) or partial connections between differently situated knowledges (Haraway) might be conceived as involving the articulation of different *place-based* knowledges, and the process of convergence that is central to the epistemic project of the WSF as entailing multiple place-based knowledges articulated in globally distributed networks.

### **Movements, media, and publics**

Questions of place and scale also are raised by the perspectives on movements and media, and the public sphere outlined earlier. The concomitant emergence of the alter-globalisation movement and the

internet has focused attention on global communication networks. For Castells (2009), the ability of movements to create or influence such networks is crucial to their success. Observing that in the network society, networks of power are usually global while resistance is usually local, Castells contends that '[h]ow to reach the global from the local, through networking with other localities – how to “grassroot” the space of flows – becomes the key strategic question for the social movements of our age' (2009: 52). Like networks of power, alternative projects must also go through global communication networks to transform consciousness if they wish to effect social change: 'it is only by acting on global discourses through the global communication networks that they can affect power relationships in the global networks that structure all societies' (Castells, 2009: 53).

Reservations about this kind of 'global thinking' aside, Castells' imperative for social movements to 'go global' is complicated by the predominantly national character of conventional mass media (cf. Nash, 2009, 2010; Ylä-Anttila, 2005). While the communication networks facilitated by the internet (arguably) might be increasingly global in reach, conventional mass media – television, radio, and newspapers – are still mostly national in orientation. Although satellite technology and the online presence of many newspapers and broadcasters mean that they increasingly exceed national borders in terms of their geographical reach, such media are still prone to select and frame news stories in accordance with hegemonic national narratives and identities (cf. Nash, 2009, 2010). This matters to social movements, because it means that, despite the opportunities offered by the internet for bypassing conventional media, such media still might be said to constitute a *relatively* unified symbolic space at the national scale, in which issues are brought into 'mediated publicness' (Thompson, 1995) and 'public opinion' is formed. Oppositional actors seeking to effect social change therefore still have to contend with 'mediated publics' (Nash, 2009: 49-58) that are predominantly

national – even if the boundaries of such publics are becoming increasingly blurred and permeable. Mediated publics constituted by mass media might be conceived as *international*, in the sense that news may ‘travel’ between different national contexts, but it is not really possible to speak of a global mediated public as such.

This links to more general questions about the potential of mediated communication to foster global solidarity (cf. Fenton, 2008b). Similarly to the way in which print media, according to Anderson (1991), played a crucial role in generating feelings of belonging to national ‘imagined communities’, the (potentially) global reach of contemporary media might be expected to facilitate the construction of political community beyond the nation (Nash, 2010: 82; cf. Robbins, 1998: 6-7). There are, however, many obstacles to the formation of ‘thick’ forms of solidarity – based on a sense of mutuality, reciprocity, and belonging together in a ‘community of fate’ – at the global scale; not least the national orientation of mediated publics (cf. Nash, 2009: Ch. 5; 2010: 78-85). Moreover, as highlighted by the discussion of alternative and citizens’ media, communication activists around the world also operate at very local scales. Participatory media projects such as community radio are often driven by a concern to enable members of local communities to express identities, negotiate differences, and enact forms of sociality that strengthen solidarity. As Rodríguez (2009) shows, such communication initiatives can also play a vital role in constructing and reinforcing a sense of place and place-based collective imaginaries. In brief, the construction of ‘imagined communities’ might happen at a number of scales. In the context of the WSF, this highlights the need to not simply bypass the local or national in favour of the global, as is often the case in studies of transnational social movement networks, but examine the multiple scales at which activists operate and the complex intersections between them.

As discussed earlier, questions of scale also are brought to the fore by theoretical debates about the concept of the public sphere. In

a globalised world, despite the persistence of national media systems and cultures, the spatiality of public spheres can no longer be taken for granted. At the same time, the scaling up of the concept from its national origins is far from straightforward. The WSF, as we have seen, is itself far from a global public sphere, if by that we mean a unified communication space that is accessible to everyone in the world. Language barriers and inequalities of access as well as the national character of mediated publics also raise serious questions about the possibility of constructing such a global public through mediated communication (cf. Nash, 2010: 225).

However, rather than understanding the term 'global public' in the sense of a unified communication space spanning the globe, and measuring the WSF up against such a model, it might be more interesting to ask how a *sense of globality* might be invoked through communication practices. This would mean avoiding the tendency in social scientific studies of globalisation to focus only on phenomena that are self-evidently global in scale (Sassen, 2007). As Sassen argues, there are numerous processes that do not necessarily scale at the global level as such, but which nonetheless are part of globalisation,

in that they insert localities in global production, organizational, cultural, social or political processes; or involve transboundary networks and entities connecting multiple local or 'national' processes and actors; or involve the recurrence of particular issues and dynamics in a growing number of countries and localities, with subjective recognition of this recurrence (2007: 3).

The notion of a 'global public', then, need not refer to a unified communication space at the self-evidently global scale. Sassen (2006: 366) suggests that the simultaneous decentralised access afforded by the internet can help 'local actors have a sense of participation in struggles that are not necessarily global but are, rather, globally distributed in that they recur across localities'. New communication technologies can contribute to the formation of 'cross-border public

spheres' and global networks that bypass central authority. In this way, 'distributed immobilities can actually come to constitute global publics' (Sassen, 2006: 366). While the struggles of actors that form part of such publics may remain focused on the locality, this is with the knowledge and explicit or implicit invocation that multiple other localities in the world are involved in similar struggles. 'This combination of multiplication and self-reflexivity contributes to constitute a global condition out of these localized practices and rhetorics' (Sassen, 2006: 373). Such a framework makes it possible to understand the often locally oriented practices of alternative and citizens' media activists – which might be conceived primarily as concerned with the construction of local or *place-based* publics – as (potentially) also having a global dimension. It makes it possible to conceive of 'global publics' as decentred, distributed, and networked – and still 'global' (cf. Bohman, 2007).

Conceived in such terms, the challenge of constructing a 'global public' in the context of the WSF lies in connecting its multiple publics. The feasibility of such a project depends on the capacity of communication activists to facilitate such connections. This returns us to the challenge of enabling the convergence and articulation of differently situated knowledges that is at the heart of the epistemic project of the WSF, and the question posed in this thesis about how activists' and organisers' use of mediated communication might contribute to this project.

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter has situated my study in relation to relevant debates about the WSF and developed the theoretical framework that I use to investigate questions about the role of mediated communication in the WSF process. The first section established the significance of mediated communication, as the terrain on which power is constituted, to the dynamics of social movements. It discussed the

problematic relationship of social movements to conventional mass media, reviewed debates about the democratic potential of the internet, and drew attention to the transformative potential of processes of media production. Next, I introduced the concepts of publics and counterpublics, demonstrating their value to the study of movements, media, and knowledge production. I discussed how the concept of publics has been employed in debates about the emancipatory potential of the WSF, and developed the understanding of publics that I use to explore the relationship between communication and knowledge production in the WSF. The following section elaborated on the common-place understanding of the WSF as a space for knowledge production, emphasising its pedagogical potential. Drawing on an understanding of social movements as key agents in social processes of knowledge production, it developed a conception of the WSF as an epistemic project that affirms the existence and validity of multiple knowledges and seeks to facilitate democratic processes of convergence between them. Finally, I problematised the WSF's claim to globality by engaging critically with issues of place and scale. I emphasised the multi-scalar character of the social forum process, discussed the epistemological and political significance of place, and considered questions of scale in relation to media and communication, and the concept of publics.

The conceptual framework developed in this chapter gives rise to the following broad research questions. *First*, how are WSF organisers and communication activists trying to make the WSF public through mediated communication, and how might these communication practices contribute to extending the WSF public? *Second*, how and to what extent might these communication practices contribute to the epistemic project of the WSF by making visible its plurality of knowledges and facilitating convergence between them? What kinds of knowledge production, and by whom, do different kinds of publics and different uses of mediated communication make possible? *Third*, in what ways might different communication

practices contribute to making the WSF global? What conceptions of globality are discernible in such practices? How does the idea of the global relate to other scales that are significant to activists? The next chapter offers an account about how I went about investigating these questions and develops the methodological framework adopted in the thesis.

## 2. Mobile positioning and situated conversations: researching multi-scalar communication practices

*Saturday, 10 January 2009, Belém do Pará, Brazil. I am having lunch with some Brazilian activist friends at Estação das Docas, a former docking area by the river which has been converted into shops and restaurants. We are engaged in a lively discussion about terminology: 'alternative media', 'free media', 'popular media'—what do these different terms actually mean? The discussion moves on to the idea of 'shared communication' – a term used by Brazilian activists to describe the collaborative and participatory media projects that they have developed within the WSF as a way to bring together independent media producers that come to cover the forums.<sup>29</sup> A key premise of these 'shared communication projects' is the sharing of media content, but equally important is the way in which they facilitate exchange of knowledge and experience among communication activists from all over the world. One of my companions turns to me and asks: 'Are you familiar with the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos?' I reply that yes, I am, I use many of his ideas in my research. 'Because I think what we are trying to do in the shared communication projects is exactly what he talks about in his theory of knowledge and the social forums', she continues. Slightly taken aback, I concur; this was precisely the analysis that had begun to take shape in the back of my mind as I was following the organisation of these projects in the lead-up to the Belém WSF! Later that evening, back at my apartment, I am left pondering this conversation. How exactly could I conceive of my own position as researcher, and my research project more generally, when my 'informants' were already articulating the kind of analysis that I was hoping to produce?*

This 'ethnographic encounter' captures, in a nutshell, the key methodological and epistemological conundrums raised by this research project. In one way, it highlights a well-known problematic in sociological research: how can sociologists claim to produce privileged knowledge of the social world when our subjects of study themselves are reflexive, knowledge producing agents? This question becomes particularly acute in research projects like mine, in which knowledge production is itself an object of study and the research

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<sup>29</sup> The concept and practice of 'shared communication' is the topic of Chapter 5.

participants themselves are, in an important sense, intellectuals. The conversation described above also dispels any notion of ethnography as involving the encounter of the researcher with an altogether different cultural universe: the discussion about terminology was held at the banks of the river Pará in the Amazon delta, but could equally have taken place at an academic conference in my own corner of the world. How, in this context, might sociological method be conceived? How might the position and role of the researcher be understood? What is the status of the knowledge produced through research? In this chapter, I elaborate the methodological framework that I have developed in the process of grappling with these and other questions of power, knowledge, and epistemology.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I discuss the rationale behind my choice of ethnography as a methodological framework and outline the modifications to traditional conceptions of ethnography necessitated by the nature of my research. Next, I offer a narrative account of the research process, detailing my choice of research sites and the particular methods of data collection employed. I then move on to discuss the methodological and epistemological implications of doing ‘multi-sited’ (Marcus, 1995) ethnography. The complexity and distributed character of the WSF mean that it is impossible to grasp as a whole; however, once the impossibility and undesirability of total knowledge is acknowledged, partiality can be embraced as a research strategy. An inescapable feature of this kind of ethnographic research is the location of the researcher and the researched within what is essentially the same field; research therefore becomes a matter of mobile positioning in order to seek out vantage points *within* rather than outside the field. I develop the notion of research as *situated conversation* as a way of conceptualising the knowledge produced in research as an outcome of the articulation of academic and other forms of knowledge, which are differently situated but not of a fundamentally different order. Such a conception does not, however, mean that power relations are

irrelevant, and in the following section I discuss my own position in such relations, emphasising the ethical as well as epistemological importance of politically engaged research. Finally, I discuss the process of analysis and writing, emphasising the importance of taking responsibility, being accountable, and producing locatable knowledge claims.

### ***Ethnography as methodological framework***

Because of my interest in practices and meanings, I chose to adopt a methodological approach that might best be described as ethnographic. The term ethnography has been applied to a variety of research techniques, from the long-term immersion of modern anthropologists in distant and 'exotic' cultures to any kind of research that involves an element of empirical analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Skeggs, 2001). The approach adopted here shares the main features of what ethnography usually is understood to involve within the sociological tradition: research was conducted over an extended period of time, in the 'natural' settings of participants, and draws on a range of methods of data collection, including participant observation (in on- and offline settings), informal conversations, in-depth interviews, and documentary research.

In choosing ethnography, I wanted to move beyond a predominantly textual approach, common in studies of mediated communication and publics, which take media *texts* as their primary object of study. While my study is definitely informed by the myriad of articles, radio programmes, and video pieces that communication activists produce, this material and the ideas contained within it are not in and of themselves the subject of my research. My primary concern is with the ways in which activists try to enable the production, dissemination, and exchange of such content, as well as with more 'immediate' forms of mediated communication such as video conferencing.

I also felt it was important to not only examine the ways in which activists communicate via the internet, or the online presence of particular groups, but to also go 'behind the scenes' and study offline practices and interactions. This is not because I conceive of on- and off-line environments as radically separate, or draw a sharp distinction between the 'virtual' and the 'real'; the two are interdependent in many ways, and as 'real' or 'virtual' as each other. It is simply because studying only the online presence and interactions of movement activists would give a very limited picture of the phenomena I am interested in. Most obviously, this relates to issues of access, resources, and cultural dispositions; not everyone has the means or inclination to spend hours participating in email discussions or documenting their activities online. For as much as the 'movement of movements' has been construed as existing in and through the internet and sharing its network form (cf. Juris, 2005b, 2008a; Kavada, 2007), researchers and activists alike would do well to keep in mind the digital divide that still exists, not only between North and South, but also between and within countries in the South, between rich and poor, young and old, urban and rural populations, and so on.<sup>30</sup> While my point of entry to the field, so to speak, was through following email discussions and studying websites, I quickly learnt that these forms of communication only told part of the story. Partly because of issues of access – a significant proportion of groups and movements that participate in the WSF are not easily able to participate in these forms of communication – but also because, as Riles (2000) found in her study of networking practices among Fijian NGOs, significant discussions often take place outside of such public forums. Getting to the heart the character and significance of communication practices within the WSF therefore required adopting

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<sup>30</sup> As Rucht (2004) highlights, because the online communication of transnational movement networks is openly available, academic observers tend to use it as their main source of information, which often leads them to overemphasise the significance of the internet to such movements.

a range of methods. In particular, as I discuss in more detail later, in-depth interviews provided a rich source of insight, and were in themselves important occasions for knowledge production.

More than just a set of methodological tools, however, ethnography is perhaps best understood as an attitude or orientation; one of the defining features of ethnographic research is its relatively open-ended and exploratory character (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In addition to the more practical considerations outlined above, my decision to adopt an ethnographic approach was also motivated by ethical and epistemological concerns. If, as suggested in the previous chapter, academic theory no longer can provide a blueprint for political practice, neither can it be expected to know the precise questions to be asked in advance when researching such practice. The decision to adopt an ethnographic rather than more structured or predefined research design was motivated by a wish to avoid imposing a particular conceptual framework from the outset. While all methodologies involve asking particular questions that produce particular answers, ethnography is more likely to produce unexpected insights because it involves the researcher asking herself 'what are the questions I should be asking?'. Indeed, while a broad interest in exploring the relationship between communication and knowledge production in the WSF was what gave impetus to this study, my research questions have emerged through an iterative process, becoming progressively refined over the course of the project.

As a methodology premised on allowing questions, concepts, and categories to emerge – at least in part – from 'the field', ethnography is potentially more responsive to the knowledges and perspectives of research participants than other approaches. That is not to say it proceeds in a purely inductive manner, or that it can claim to produce a transparent representation of research

participants' experience or a somehow authentic 'view from below'.<sup>31</sup> What ethnography does make possible, however, is a view from *somewhere*: insofar as it involves the researcher locating herself within particular cultural and/or geographic contexts, it can provide insights into what the world looks like from particular vantage points. In this sense, it has affinities with the epistemological frameworks outlined in Chapter 1, and lends itself to a process of knowledge production that proceeds on the basis of deliberate and explicit positioning in order to enter into dialogue and 'see together with' (Haraway, 1991) a diverse range of actors.

The phenomena that are the focus of this study do, however, present distinct methodological challenges that necessitate significant modifications to traditional conceptions of ethnography. *First*, researching communication practices in the WSF process necessarily involves studying 'distributed phenomena' (Kelty, 2008) that are not confined to a single site. Social forums take place at different times in different geographical locations, and communication activists and organisers, when not gathered at such events, are spread across the globe. This necessitates a form of ethnography that is mobile and multi-sited (Marcus, 1995). *Second*, this study involves researching the practices and ideas of actors who are themselves intellectuals – journalists, popular educators, video and radio producers, and computer programmers – and who analyse their own practice in sophisticated terms. Their reflections cannot simply be treated as 'raw data' to be interpreted by the researcher, as in traditional conceptions of ethnography. Rather, it is necessary to

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<sup>31</sup> Nor does it mean that there is anything inherently progressive about ethnography itself; its origin as a technology for classifying and controlling colonial Others barely needs mentioning as a reminder of this (cf. Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As Skeggs (2001) points out, it is not the method itself but the way in which it is deployed, and for what ends, that makes the difference. Ethnography has been conceived within feminist and other progressive research as a method for gaining access to the experience and cultural viewpoints of oppressed groups, and although simplistic notions of 'giving voice' have since been discredited, the ethical and political imperative to take seriously the knowledge and experience of research participants is, I believe, an essential component of any ethnographic research that claims to be progressive.

engage seriously with their analyses and understand the knowledge production that takes place in research as a collaborative effort. *Third*, studying social movement activists who are struggling to change the world necessitates a brand of research that is engaged and politically committed. In carrying out this research, assuming the traditional role of detached observer was not an option; partly because the activists I worked with would have been unlikely to give access to a researcher who did not at least share their broad goals and was prepared to work with them towards those goals (cf. Alleyne, 2002: 14), and partly because being an active participant produces insights that are not available through observation alone.

This research project is motivated by a wish not only to *understand* a set of practices and ideas, but also to contribute to their development. This necessitates a form of ethnographic practice that is committed to breaking down traditional hierarchies between researcher and researched, focused on facilitating collaborative knowledge production and collective reflection, and which produces locatable knowledge claims. These and other concerns will be addressed in more detail in what follows. First, a narrative account of the research process is in order.

### ***The research process***

The main period of fieldwork carried out for this thesis began in September 2008 when I attended the fifth European Social Forum (ESF) in Malmö, Sweden. In the months leading up to this forum I had been following preparatory discussions on the ESF mailing list, and established contact with activists and organisers involved in the documentation of the event. During my stay, I followed the organisation of the Independent Media Centre, the work of a group of librarians collecting physical documentation from the forum, and efforts by the so-called Outcomes Working Group to facilitate documentation and dissemination of the results from the forum. I

attended a number of seminars and workshops and carried out in-depth interviews with activists and organisers. After the ESF itself, I attended a meeting of the International Council (IC) in Copenhagen, where I first met members of the Council's Communication Commission and the WSF 2009 organising committee.

Next, in October 2008 I attended the third Social Forum of the Americas (SFA) in Guatemala City. This was where I was first introduced to the ideas and practices of Latin American communication activists and the broader movement for the democratisation of communication of which they form part. I participated in meetings to organise the Independent Media Centre, attended seminars and workshops on the topic of communication, and carried out interviews. Having had less opportunity to establish contacts prior to this forum, my research here was inevitably of a more preliminary character, but nonetheless vital in terms of introducing me to Latin American organisations, networks, and perspectives.

Shortly after, I travelled to Brazil in order to spend an extended period of time, from October 2008 to March 2009, following the organisation of the ninth WSF, which was held in January 2009 in the city of Belém in the Amazon. In the months leading up to the event, I worked as a volunteer in the local WSF office and participated in the organisation of alternative media projects. I had particular responsibility for acting as a point of contact between the WSF office and the European coordinators of 'Belém Expanded', a project which sought to enable groups who could not be physically present to participate in the Forum via video conference.<sup>32</sup> I participated regularly in meetings of the local Communication Working Group, which was made up of a variety of communication activists from the local area and elsewhere in Brazil, as well as some 'internationals' (including myself). I attended weekly meetings of the Forum in

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<sup>32</sup> I discuss Belém Expanded in Chapter 7.

Defence of Community Radios (*Fórum em Defesa das Rádios Comunitárias*), which brought together community radio activists from Belém and the surrounding area, some of whom were members of the Communication Working Group.<sup>33</sup> I also participated in meetings between the Working Group and students at the Federal University of Pará (*Universidade Federal do Pará - UFPA*), one of the universities which hosted the WSF, and, in the weeks immediately preceding the forum, took part in workshops and meetings at the 'Shared Communication Laboratory' that was set up at the premises of a local NGO as a space for communication activists to plan and start producing media coverage of the forum.<sup>34</sup>

During the forum itself, I spent the majority of my time moving between the alternative media centre, the general media centre, and the Belém Expanded space (all of which were conveniently located next to each other) following the work of communication activists and participating in their meetings and workshops. Prior to and during the forum, I carried out a number of in-depth interviews with activists and organisers. Immediately after the WSF 2009, I attended a two-day meeting of the IC. I then spent the remainder of my time in Brazil doing documentary research and follow-up interviews. This included a week-long stay in São Paulo, where I interviewed activists based there and visited the central WSF office in order to access its archives.

After returning from Brazil in March 2009, I continued following the work of the Communication Commission, though in a less intensive manner, by participating in weekly online chats and following discussions on the Commission's mailing list. At the end of January 2010, I returned to Brazil for a brief period of follow-up fieldwork at a social forum in Porto Alegre that was organised to mark the tenth year of the WSF. Here I participated in the production of shared media coverage, helped organise a live connection between

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<sup>33</sup> I discuss the Forum in Defence of Community Radios and the work of community radio activists in Belém in Chapter 6.

<sup>34</sup> The Shared Communication Laboratory is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

communication activists in Brazil and anti-occupation activists in Palestine, and participated in seminars about shared communication. I was also able to carry out some brief follow-up interviews with activists I had met during my previous stay in Brazil.

As circumstance would have it, I also during this trip had the opportunity to attend the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries (*Fórum Social Expandido das Periferias*) – a small social forum organised in the neighbourhood of Dunas in Pelotas, a city located three hours by bus from Porto Alegre. I had met one of the organisers in Belém, who invited me to Pelotas as his guest. During this forum, I participated in seminars, attended cultural activities, and interviewed organisers. Not originally part of my fieldwork plan, and definitely not a ‘major’ social forum event in terms of its size and visibility, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries proved to be a crucial source of insight into the perspectives of actors who occupy a very different location from that of the ‘WSF elite’ who are able to travel around the world to attend forum events. The organisers’ innovative use of communication technologies to connect their community with activists in other parts of the world provided an example of how locally rooted activists can construct a very different route to the global, and provided key insights into the shifting significance of the ‘local’ and ‘global’ in the WSF process.

After completing the main period of fieldwork for this study, I also have participated in social forums as a communication activist. In October 2010, I took part in the World Education Forum in Palestine as a contributor to Ciranda, an independent communication network that emerged within the WSF process, taking photographs and reporting on the forum itself and the situation in Palestine more generally. In February 2011, I participated in the World Social Forum in Dakar, Senegal; again as part of Ciranda. This time I had particular responsibility for coordinating translations of articles into the four main languages of the WSF (English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese). I also participated in workshops at the Indymedia Africa

centre that was set up for the occasion, and attended seminars organised by alternative media activists as well as meetings of the Communication Commission. This involvement has given me important first-hand insights into the practices and experiences of communication activists.

In total, I carried out 86 in-depth interviews, ranging between 18 and 217 minutes in duration, with an average of 68 minutes. The majority of these were conducted in English or Portuguese (sometimes a mixture of both); a small number were done in Swedish and Norwegian, and in Spanish. Prior to commencing fieldwork in Brazil I had spent over three months studying Portuguese intensively and had reached a level of proficiency which enabled me to conduct interviews with minimal assistance. Just over a third of the interviews in Portuguese, carried out at the beginning of my fieldwork, were conducted with the help of interpreters; I was subsequently able to do the remainder without assistance. I conducted the interviews in Spanish with the help of an interpreter and those in Scandinavian languages on my own, Norwegian being my first language.

### ***Doing multi-sited ethnography***

As should be apparent, the methodological approach adopted for this study does not conform to conventional understandings of ethnographic fieldwork as based on long-term immersion in a single site. Rather, it is an example of ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus, 1995), in the quite straightforward sense that it was carried out in a number of different sites. Social forums, where communication activists gather and which serve as spaces for experimentation with new communication practices, take place in different locations at different times; in order to encounter these activists and gain an understanding of their practices it is necessary to travel where they go. Though multi-sited, my research is therefore not focused primarily on the sites themselves, but on a particular set of practices

and the imaginaries and ideas associated with those practices. My field sites provide *occasions* for studying these practices and imaginaries.

This does not mean that sites are irrelevant; as shown in Chapter 1, place matters to the content, format and 'feel' of any particular social forum, and the same applies to the communication practices of activists in different locations. When planning my research, I felt it was important to not simply move from forum to forum, but to also gain more in-depth insight into what the WSF looks like from the vantage point provided by the particular location in which it is held. My research design therefore combines elements of multi-sited and 'grounded' ethnography (Burawoy, 2000). The longer stay in Belém provided important insights into what the WSF meant to activists there, while the more mobile approach of visiting several social forums allowed me to appreciate the feeling of globality that characterises the experience of activists who are able to travel to such events.

One of the 'methodological anxieties' that this kind of multi-sited approach might give rise to relates to the quality of fieldwork, given that ethnography's knowledge claims have traditionally been tied to the method of long-term immersion in a single site (Marcus, 1995). Clearly, doing multi-sited fieldwork involves a certain trade-off between the number of sites and the length of time one is able to spend in each, and the material gathered during my main field trip to Belém is inevitably of a different quality and quantity than that from other sites. As Marcus points out, 'multi-sited ethnographies inevitably are the product of knowledge bases of varying intensity and qualities'; this variability, however, is not an argument against bringing research from different sites into the same frame of study (1995: 100).

Indeed, a multi-sited approach is the only possible way in which to study a globally distributed phenomenon like the WSF. This is not to say that it is possible to study the WSF, or its associated

communication practices, as a whole. Though multi-sited, an ethnographic study of communication practices in the WSF process is necessarily partial, for the simple reason that its sheer size and complexity makes the WSF impossible to study in its entirety.<sup>35</sup> However, as Marcus (1995: 99) argues, '[a]lthough multi-sited ethnography is an exercise in mapping terrain, its goal is not holistic representation, an ethnographic representation of the world system as a totality'. Precisely because of the distributed nature of global processes like the WSF, any given node or site can be 'a source of rich and detailed knowledge about the distributed phenomenon itself, not only about the local site' (Kelty, 2008: 20). This does not mean that all sites are the same or enable the same view, but rather that any given site can provide a vantage point from which to observe the phenomenon in question. Each of the social forums I attended yielded important insights into the nature of communication practices within the WSF; not as microcosms or concrete expressions of an abstract ideal type, but as instantiations of a global process that is constituted through its different manifestations.

Given the large number of potential research sites within the WSF process, I inevitably had to make a selection and delimit my field. As Amit (2000) argues, the shift towards multi-sited ethnography renders the ethnographer an even more central agent than before in the *construction* of the field.

[I]n a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery. It has to be laboriously constructed, prised apart from all the other possibilities for contextualization to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred. This process of construction is inescapably shaped by the conceptual, professional, financial and relational opportunities accessible to the ethnographer (Amit, 2000: 6).

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<sup>35</sup> J. Smith, Juris et al. (2008) make a similar point about the impossibility of gaining a complete overview of a single social forum event, even with a large team of researchers.

My choice of sites was to a certain extent arbitrary, in the sense of being based on factors like the ones highlighted by Amit as well as the intrinsic value to the project of the sites themselves. The ESF and SFA 2008 and WSF 2009 were the main social forums that coincided with the period of my doctoral studies that was supposed to be dedicated to fieldwork, and these were the field trips I was able to secure funding for as part of my ESRC studentship. The Porto Alegre event in January 2010 was one of many social forums that year, but seemed a particularly good opportunity to reconnect with activists I had met during my previous stay in Brazil, and I received funding for this from the University of London Central Research Fund. The opportunity to attend the forum in Pelotas, as mentioned above, arose due to its temporal and geographical proximity to the Porto Alegre event.

Like any selection, my choice of field sites inevitably involves exclusions. The main limitation is perhaps that it reproduces the European and Latin American bias that historically has characterised the WSF itself. However, the choice of Belém as my primary field site also had distinct advantages. The WSF being held in its country of origin meant that I had access to activists who had played key roles in the Porto Alegre editions of the WSF, as many of them were actively involved in the preparations for Belém. This enabled me to gain insights into the historical development of communication practices within the WSF, which would not have been as easily available elsewhere. Like all ostensibly global processes, the WSF comes from *somewhere*, and my primary field site provided an excellent vantage point from which to grasp its geo-historical trajectory. Belém was also advantageous by virtue of not being the original location of the Forum, which enabled me to gain insights into the perspectives of activists and organisers who were new to the WSF process. Though they are in the same country, the distance between Belém and Porto Alegre (or São Paulo, where many key actors in the WSF are based) is huge, not only in geographical terms but also culturally and

economically. The WSF 2009 was held in a very different context and environment than previous forums, which meant it faced different challenges, made visible different actors and issues, and had its own distinctive dynamics. Belém, in short, was unique in that it enabled me to gain an understanding of the origins and trajectory of a global process as well as what happens when this process arrives in a new location.

The account presented here is decidedly partial; however, once we recognise the impossibility and undesirability of total knowledge, and acknowledge exactly what can and cannot be seen from any given location, partiality becomes something to be embraced rather than perceived as a problem. One way to think about this is, as Hine (2000) suggests, to conceive of ethnography as an experientially based way of knowing, in which understanding comes (at least partly) from the ethnographer having similar experiences as those of his or her informants. As I discovered over the course of my research, the feeling of never being able to grasp the whole picture or fully *know* the WSF is a defining feature of the experience of being involved in the Forum process. When I first began my fieldwork I was struck by the feeling of never quite being able to get a handle on what was going on, who knew about what, who to speak to in order to get something done, and so on. I initially put this down to language barriers and my status as a newcomer, but as I spoke with activists and organisers, and became more proficient in Portuguese, I gradually became aware that they to a considerable degree shared my experience.

An anecdote from an interview with Candyce Rocha, the manager of the WSF office in Belém, is illustrative. Rocha was also relatively new to the WSF, but had been working for the office for several months at the time of our conversation. During the interview, she expressed frustration at the lack of communication among the different bodies involved in organising the forum and the difficulties

this caused as people never knew what others were doing. I was struck by how similar this was to my own experience:

H: It is interesting to hear you say this because this was kind of my big difficulty when I got here as well, you know, 'who does what?', 'what does everybody do?' Obviously a lot of it is because of language [...] but then I realised more and more that it is a problem for everybody to know what is going on.

C: Yes it *is*. Still now, when everybody is coming to Belém, people from [the Facilitation Group], International Council, and you know, all the forum sponsors [...], there are people coming to Belem [...] and I have *no* idea who they are. And you may have noticed, they've starting showing up, you know, sitting down, using the computers, [and I'm like] 'Hello, can I help you? And you are...?' It's funny... (interview, January 2009).

My own experience of only ever getting a partial view of what was going on at any given time thus enabled me to understand and appreciate the experience of people involved in organising the forum. Not only that, what I initially became aware of through first-hand experience enabled the more analytical insight that the opacity of the WSF, which I at first had thought was due to my own inexperience and lack of knowledge, is actually a more general feature of its supposedly open organisational form.<sup>36</sup>

Partiality also can be embraced as a way of practising the mobile positioning and search for partial connections that Haraway (1991) insists is necessary in order to achieve objectivity once the impossibility of a 'view from nowhere' is acknowledged. As Marcus (1995) highlights, an inescapable feature of multi-sited ethnography is the location of the ethnographer *within* rather than outside of the field. Similarly, Riles (2000: 5) argues that what renders transnationalism new is 'the ethnographic encounter with knowledge practices are already familiar to, and indeed in use by, the anthropologist at precisely the moment at which he or she seeks insight through fresh ethnographic observation'. The consequence of this is that – contrary to the traditional reliance on temporal, spatial,

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<sup>36</sup> I return to this point in Chapter 4 where I discuss efforts of communication activists to fulfil the WSF's promise of openness.

and/or analytical distanciation from 'the field' as a source of authority for ethnographic knowledge claims (Amit, 2000; Woolgar, 1988) – there is no longer ‘an “outside” on and against which to work our analytical devices’ (Riles, 2000: 5). If the researcher can no longer claim the position of outsider, it becomes necessary to seek out locations *within* the field from which the phenomenon under investigation can be explored. Mobile positioning then becomes a practice that is not only understood in geographical terms, but also as experiential and cognitive movement, a constant shifting of positioning between situations, people, identities, and perspectives (Amit, 2000).

The loss of the outside also requires a departure from the traditional division of labour in ethnographic research, by which participants provide the ‘raw data’ and the researcher does the analysis, towards an understanding of research participants as co-producers of knowledge about their own circumstances. While this is applicable to all research contexts, as all human subjects actively reflect on the meaning of their actions and experiences, the need for such a reconceptualisation becomes particularly pertinent in research projects like mine where the subjects of the research are themselves in the ‘knowledge business’ and produce their own, often highly sophisticated, analyses of their practice. This problematic is highlighted by Riles (2000: xiv): ‘It has always been the subjects' job to produce the symbols and the anthropologist's job to produce the analysis, so to speak. Yet what is one to make of a subject [...] that one encounters already analyzed?’ I believe a starting point is to enter into dialogue with these analyses and be prepared to learn from them. In the following section, I develop this argument through the notion of research as situated conversation.

### ***Research as situated conversation***

The methodological concerns outlined above resonate strongly with debates within social movement studies and between scholars and activists about the relationship of theorists to the movements they study. Many activists have – rightly – been suspicious of academics studying movements from a position as detached observers, expropriating collectively produced knowledge for their own personal career gain and publishing findings in academic journals with limited circulation. Acutely aware of such criticisms, politically committed movement theorists, who often themselves come from activist backgrounds, have been anxious to 'give something back' to the movements they study, to enter into dialogue with activists and produce analyses that are relevant to and useful for political praxis.<sup>37</sup>

As Eyerman and Jamison (1991) point out, there has been a tendency within the sociology of social movements to see activists and intellectuals as two distinct categories, with intellectuals providing movements with ideological direction and leadership. In this conception, intellectuals take part in movements 'from their position as intellectuals, not as activists among equals' (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991: 96). Such a distinction becomes particularly problematic in the context of the alter-globalisation movement and the WSF. Intellectuals who have positions in universities and research institutes play key roles within the WSF, researchers from activist backgrounds practice militant ethnography (e.g. Graeber, 2009; Juris, 2008a), and, perhaps more than in any movement before it, activists who do not hold formal positions as intellectuals produce sophisticated analyses and reports that circulate within movement networks. 'When so many activists practice their own theorising, self-

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<sup>37</sup> Recent examples of ethnographic studies in this tradition include Juris (2008a) and Graeber (2009). *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, an open-access online journal run by a transnational editorial collective of activist-scholars, is as the name suggests an attempt to bring together activist and academic knowledge for a broader readership than traditional academic journals ([www.interfacejournal.net](http://www.interfacejournal.net)).

publishing, and electronic distribution, the traditional functions of Gramsci's organic intellectual – providing strategic analysis and political direction – are undermined' (Juris, 2008a: 22).

The emergence of the internet and new communication technologies undoubtedly has had a fundamental impact on the nature of intellectual activity within social movements. As Juris (2008a: 271) argues, 'contemporary social movements are uniquely self-reflexive': mass mobilisations and forum events are always accompanied by hundreds of activists taking photographs, recording audio-visual footage, and conducting interviews. Media content can be circulated rapidly within movement networks and played back to activists, contributing to what Chesters and Welsh (2006) describe as an iterative collective process of 'reflexive framing'. The capacity 'to record, review, re-sequence, retrieve, time-shift and "re-perform" events marks [...] a significant shift in the representational sophistication of the movement milieu' (Chesters & Welsh, 2006: 9). The ubiquity of electronic communication and its centrality to processes of meaning construction within movements point towards a key role for communication activists in movement-based knowledge production, making it not unreasonable to suggest that Gramsci's 'notion of the "organic intellectual" might almost be re-rendered as the "communicator/activist"' (Downing, 2001: 15).

Researching communication practices within the WSF process, then, means situating myself within a field that is inhabited by 'other intellectuals'. Instead of attempting to study their practices and ideas from a somehow external vantage point, I therefore prefer to conceptualise the research process as a conversation taking place *within* the field, with multiple, differently situated actors. I use the term conversation not only to draw attention to the quality of concrete interactions such as those taking place during interviews (though this is an important consideration), but also to signal an understanding of the knowledge that results from this research as produced through the articulation of my own analysis and that of the

activists who participated. This means taking their analyses of their own political practice seriously *as analyses*, which are not of a fundamentally different order to my own.

Such an understanding of research as conversation necessitates a reconceptualisation of the relationship between academic and other forms of knowledge. Santos's (2007a) call for dialogue between scientific and 'common-sense' knowledge is instructive in this respect. The need for such a dialogue, according to Santos, arises from the realisation that modern science, in basing itself on narrow criteria of rigour and objectivity, and prioritising knowledge of *how* things work over questions of value and purpose, produces a rather limited understanding of the world. 'Common-sense' knowledge, by contrast, exists in a more immediate relationship with the complexities of human experience and is more oriented towards practical solutions. By itself, it can be conservative and used to legitimate domination, but it also has a potentially liberating dimension – evident in its democratic and pragmatic orientation – which can be enhanced by dialogue with scientific knowledge, resulting in a new emancipatory common sense (Santos, 2007a).

Suggestive of a more modest role for academic knowledge, such a framework allows for an understanding of research as conversation between different *kinds* of knowledges. However, the distinction between 'scientific' and 'common-sense' knowledge is not entirely appropriate in the context of my research, as it implies an understanding of the former as uniquely analytical and the latter as tacit and unreflexive. I prefer, therefore – drawing on Haraway's (1991) classic account of knowledge production as a matter of partial connections between situated, embodied agents with partial visions of the world – to speak of research as *situated conversation*. In using this term, I wish to signal a move away from a conception of 'scientific' and 'other' forms of knowledge as being of a different order, while acknowledging that any knowledge formation is shaped by particular assumptions and concerns. This makes it possible to

conceive of researchers' and activists' knowledges as existing within the same field, while shaped by different interests and orientations. In other words, each is a partial perspective which may contribute unique insights.

If the social movement theorist cannot claim authority for his or her knowledge claims on the basis of these being *uniquely* reflexive and analytical, what might the particular contribution of sociological research be? Rather than providing ideological and political direction for movements or producing detached, 'objective' knowledge for its own sake, I believe the main contribution that engaged and critically informed research can make is to facilitate activist self-reflection and thereby assist in the clarification of their goals and strategies. This implies a conceptualisation of the research relationship which foregrounds participant reflexivity – the capacity of research participants to critically reflect on and, as a result, modify their own knowledge and practice (Riach, 2009). Researchers might contribute to such reflexivity during the research process itself, or after the completion of a research project by offering their analyses back to activists for further reflection and debate.

During the course of my fieldwork, I found that interviews in particular provided important occasions for activists to reflect on their ideas and practices. Having initially been reluctant to pester busy activists to give up their valuable time to talk to me, I quickly discovered that many were more than happy to do so, not only to 'help me out' with my research, but also because they valued the 'time out' that interviews offered for reflection and systematisation of thoughts. In this sense, interviews were not only a methodological tool for discovering already existing meanings, but also in themselves occasions for knowledge production, for interviewer and interviewee alike. The following interview extract illustrates not only this conception of interviews as a space for reflection but also the joint reflection on the impact of the research itself that sometimes occurred:

F: I would be interested in the actual outcome of the interview. Because this... it is interesting how our capacity to systematise our knowledges, it happens to the extent that we share, that we dialogue. So this formulation, even if it is present in my culture, my history, my expectation for the future, it might not have been systematised previously. So this provocation that you make also stimulates me to re-elaborate, reorganise my way of producing and constructing knowledge.

H: It's interesting this, because at the same time as I am doing the research to learn about your knowledge, this also provokes a...

F: a change

H: a change, right?

F: not in the way I see the world, but a change or a possibility for production as well

H: and to provoke reflection?

F: that's right

H: and every time I do an interview it provokes reflection

F: in you?

H: in me

F: in the interviewer herself and in the interviewee

H: exactly

F: interesting

(Interview with Florismar Oliveira Thomaz, February 2010, my translation from Portuguese)<sup>38</sup>

In addition to the more immediate opportunities for reflection that interviews offered, many activists also welcomed my research as a contribution to a longer-term project of documentation and systematisation which might further their goals. Adriano de Angelis, a Brazilian shared communication activist, explained this in the following terms:

In truth the simple fact of stopping to talk about this and structure ideas is an exercise in memory, which beyond [your research] makes us who are also connecting with this remember the issues that are important for the continuity of this process going forward. Anyway, I am quite concerned about this issue, and it made me really happy when you said that you were creating this record, because I think, apart from the problems that exist, and which have to be mentioned and pointed out and thrown light upon, all these procedural issues and everything else, there is a role that you will fulfil here, which is to organise these ideas so that other people who have not participated so far might know how to connect with this history in a real manner (interview, January 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

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<sup>38</sup> Florismar Oliveira Thomaz was one of the organisers of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries, which I discuss in Chapter 7.

These comments draw attention to the second main way in which I hope this project might contribute to activist reflection: by drawing together and systematising the diverse range of ideas I have encountered in the course of my research and producing a critical interpretation, on the basis of the practical and theoretical tools at my disposal, which can then be offered back to activists. Again, though it makes use of theoretical concepts, this is not an account that is privileged by virtue of being uniquely analytical or reflexive. The main difference between the sociological interpretation offered here and activists' own analyses of their practice is perhaps the time that has gone into producing it. In contrast to the activists that participated in this research, I have had the privilege of being able to dedicate four years full time to researching and reflecting on communication and knowledge production in the WSF.

To summarise: the notion of research as situated conversation, applied as a methodological principle in this study, arises from a concern to move beyond traditional conceptions of intellectuals and activists as distinct categories, and to develop an understanding of the knowledge produced during the course of research as an outcome of the articulation of different perspectives. Such a conception of the status of sociological research means according intellectuals a more modest position than what has historically been the case; as constituting what Santos (2009) has described as a 'rearguard' rather than vanguard. Insofar as it places activist and academic knowledges on a level playing field and seeks to facilitate articulation between them, the notion of research as situated conversation goes some way towards ameliorating traditional power hierarchies in ethnographic practice. It would be naïve, however, to suggest that it does away with them. The following section considers my position in the field.

### ***Power, identity, positioning: my role as researcher***

As the previous discussion makes clear, a key methodological challenge in this project has been to develop a framework for researching 'other intellectuals'. However, this does not mean that all of the activists that participated in the research are placed equally within hierarchies of power – in relation to me as researcher or to each other. In some cases, my fieldwork involved conversations with activists who are highly educated, multi-lingual, hyper-mobile, constantly connected, and who have access to the decision-making bodies of the WSF. In others, it involved interactions with activists such as community radio organisers in Belém, who have less formal education, lack resources to travel, have precarious internet access, and who occupy more peripheral positions in relation to the WSF. While these activists are no less 'movement intellectuals' (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991) than their more mobile counterparts, they clearly are differently situated within global hierarchies of power – not least within the WSF – and this makes a difference. My own characteristics – educated, relatively mobile, proficient in more than one language – clearly place me in a similar position to that of the former category of activists, and during my fieldwork in Belém as well as in Dunas I was acutely aware of being perceived by some activists as part of a global 'WSF elite'. Such power differentials cannot easily be ameliorated through methodological dictates, however carefully applied. What I have tried to do is apply the principle of mobile positioning not only in order to follow activists who travel around the world, but also as a method for examining what the WSF looks like from the vantage point of those who are less mobile. That is, I have attempted to position myself so that I might 'see together with' activists in locations that receive the WSF (see Chapter 6) and who try to connect with the global in ways that challenge conventional notions of centre and periphery (Chapter 7).

Ethnography being an embodied method, ascribed characteristics such as ethnicity, national identity, gender, and age clearly make a difference to the research process, though not necessarily in obvious ways. My identity as a white European clearly places me in a position of privilege, which is close to that of some of the participants in this research, quite a distance from that of others. Potentially, it places me at a distance from many activists from the global South, but at the same time I do not want to overplay such a North-South divide, as power differences also exist among and within countries and movements in the global South. For example, professional journalists from the south of Brazil occupy quite a different location from most community radio activists in the Amazon, and in the eyes of the latter, I occupy a similar position to that of the former. Education and disposable income, together with ethnicity – which overlap with but do not map onto geopolitical divides in any straightforward manner – are perhaps the most important determinants of privilege. Gender and age also make a difference, and in this respect being (relatively) young and female potentially places me in a position of disadvantage in relation to the middle-aged men who still dominate many of the Forum's formal and informal decision-making structures, and might diminish the weight that my analysis carries vis-à-vis those of older and more experienced male activists and scholars.

While these differences clearly matter, over-emphasising them might inadvertently contribute to their reification, with the essentialist and solipsist implications this has in terms of who can make knowledge claims about what. As Haraway reminds us, the capacity to see the world from the standpoint of subjugated groups is not a question of identity, but rather a question of seeing together with such groups. The WSF itself – though not free from power differences or sexist and colonial mindsets – has been a hugely important experiment in, and expression of, global solidarity *across* such differences. Taking cue from the practical experience of the WSF, the

notion of solidarity might provide a foundation for conceptualising research relationships in which actors are differently positioned in hierarchies of power (cf. Motta, 2009).

As should be clear from the discussion above, this research has not been carried out from a position of detached objectivity. First and foremost, because this becomes impossible once we acknowledge the necessarily situated and partial character of all knowledge. Abandoning the ideal of detached objectivity does not, however, imply a descent into relativism; rather, it involves broadening the focus of scholarly research from a narrow concern with questions of *how* things work to also include questions of value and purpose (cf. Santos, 2007a). In addition to describing the practices and ideas of communication activists, I also wish to contribute to debates about their emancipatory potential. In this respect, my research responds to the demand of what Denzin and Lincoln refer to as the eighth (and contemporary) moment in qualitative research, which ‘asks that the social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation states, globalization, freedom, and community’ (2005: 3). It also can be situated within the broad tradition of feminist epistemologies and research methods, which has long made the case for politically committed research (Harding, 2004; Letherby, 2003; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Ramazanoglu, 2002; Reinharz, 1994; Roberts, 1981).

Political and ethical motivations aside, the need for engaged research also arises from very practical concerns. In Belém, my initial access to the field was facilitated through offering to work as a volunteer for the local WSF office, and I subsequently also assisted in the organisation of various communication projects. Organising a social forum event requires huge amounts of time, energy, and resources, all of which are in scarce supply within social movements; standing by and observing activists do all the hard work was

therefore simply not an option.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, as someone who moved within a number of different circles in order to carry out fieldwork, I also became, with time, a conduit for information about logistical and organisational issues. For example, I would update community radio activists on registration procedures or how to get involved with the shared communication projects. Not sharing this information, for fear of 'contaminating' the field, would have been counterproductive to what activists and organisers were trying to achieve.

The brand of participant observation carried out for this thesis is therefore one in which the emphasis is distinctly on *participation*, following a conception of ethnography as an experientially based way of knowing that produces a reflexive understanding of what it is like, in this case, to be involved in the WSF process (cf. Hine, 2000). Taking this line of argument further, adopting a position as active participant helps counteract what Wacquant (1992: 39) refers to as the 'intellectual bias' – the tendency to 'construe the world as a spectacle, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically' (quoted in Juris, 2008a: 20). In this respect, active participation in social practice can facilitate the kind of understanding that is required in order to address questions of value and purpose. However, it is also crucial as a means for grasping the *how* of social practice.

The tendency to position oneself at a distance and treat social life as an object to decode rather than entering the flow and rhythm of ongoing social interaction hinders our ability to understand social practice. To grasp the concrete logic generating specific practices, one has to become an active participant (Juris, 2008a: 20).

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<sup>39</sup> However, I did on some occasions have to decline requests for assistance with organisational tasks in order to ensure I had enough time available for my research. Having to step back and draw boundaries in this way was at times uncomfortable and served to remind both myself and the activists I worked with of my dual role as researcher and participant.

The methodological approach adopted for this research is, then, decidedly one based on engagement and active participation. It might not fit entirely within the category of 'militant ethnography' (Juris 2008), mostly because I did not initially embark on this project from a previous position as activist. While I have a background from various types of activism, including a socialist political party, feminist/LGBT groups, and student politics, I had not been involved directly in the social forum process prior to commencing my research, and my knowledge of it came largely from academic literature, alternative media, and email discussion lists. The role I assumed during the research process is perhaps best described as falling somewhere between 'militant ethnographer' and 'circumstantial activist' – the latter referring to the role advocated by Marcus (1995) as a means to give unity to the ethnographer's movements across multiple sites. The circumstantial activist constantly renegotiates identities and takes advantage of whatever positions are available in different sites that allow her to further the aims of the research while acting in accordance with her ethical and political principles (Marcus, 1995). Over the course of this project I have certainly assumed a number of different positions depending on the opportunities available to me. I assisted with a project to document the outcomes of the ESF in Malmö, worked as a volunteer for the WSF office in Belém, participated in the production of alternative media coverage in Porto Alegre, and in Dunas I was a panellist in a seminar on communication in the WSF process. In Palestine and Dakar, I participated more as a communication activist than as a researcher. My choice of positions has not, however, been purely opportunistic or defined by circumstance alone, but also guided by a concern with building longer-term relationships with activists who also move between sites and being able to see together with actors who occupy less privileged positions within global relations of power.

### ***Analysis, writing, and the authority of the text***

Concerned that the collective process of knowledge production that went into producing this thesis should be reflected in the final product, I have sought to give prominence to the contributions of the activists who participated. The analysis presented in the following chapters is therefore based primarily on in-depth interviews, while I have drawn on field notes, documents, and online communication for context, detail, and clarification.

All of the interviews I conducted were recorded and the majority transcribed either in full or part. A Brazilian native speaker transcribed the interviews in Portuguese while I did most of the interviews in English and Scandinavian languages myself, with some professional assistance. On the basis of these transcripts, I created a short summary document for each interview in order to gain an overview of the material and draw out key themes. These themes were then used to guide further analysis and more detailed exploration of the transcripts and other data sources. I used the NVivo computer package for qualitative data analysis to organise the material and to code and retrieve key passages. I analysed all transcripts and documents in their original language and where appropriate translated any extracts quoted into English.<sup>40</sup>

My analysis thus developed through an iterative and exploratory process that was guided by broad research interests specified at the outset but open to unanticipated themes emerging over the course of the research. Qualitative data analysis of this kind is often conceptualised as a process of moving back and forth between theoretical concepts and empirical material, combining inductive and deductive approaches to produce an interpretation that is guided by theoretical concerns while also allowing concepts to emerge from 'the field'. The methodological perspective developed

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<sup>40</sup> Where extracts have been translated from other languages into English this is indicated immediately following the relevant quote.

here calls for a reconceptualisation of the analysis process which does not rely on such a neat separation between 'theory' and 'data'. If research is a matter of conversation between subjects who are differently situated within what is fundamentally the *same* field, and the aim of research is not only to understand the *how* of any given phenomenon or practice but also to engage in debates about value and purpose, analysis becomes more akin to what Alasuutari (1995: 16) describes as a process of 'unriddling': 'on the basis of the clues produced and hints available, [giving] an interpretive explanation of the phenomenon being studied'. Crucially, such clues and hints can come from a variety of sources, including academic *and* activist knowledges, with no a priori hierarchy posited between them.

The written account presented here is in important respects the result of the piecing together of a variety of narratives, ideas, and concepts; some taken from academic literature, others from my research participants. At first glance, such a conception of the writing process resonates with notions – associated with the postmodern or discursive turn in qualitative research – of the researcher as *bricoleur* or quilt maker and of the ethnographic text as a form of montage. 'The qualitative researcher who uses montage is like a quilt maker or a jazz improviser. The quilter stitches, edits, and puts slices of reality together' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 5). The use of montage in ethnographic writing has been advocated as a means to inject instability into textual organisation and juxtapose different elements so that no single interpretation is possible (Woolgar, 1988). While recognising the importance of challenging the authority of the author and the notion that there is one correct interpretation, the account presented here does not quite conform to such notions of a 'radical constitutive reflexivity' of the text. I have consciously set out to construct an argument and produce a coherent narrative that might in some way contribute to advancing knowledge and understanding. Speaking in a distinct and locatable voice is, I believe, part of being accountable for one's knowledge claims; simply juxtaposing and

leaving fragments collected from different sources to 'speak for themselves' (as in certain styles of postmodern writing) would, I believe, effectively amount to an abdication of responsibility.

Taking responsibility and being accountable also means assuming ownership of the text. The narrative presented here is *my* interpretation of communication practices in the WSF process, constructed on the basis of the conceptual and experiential resources available to me. These resources include – to a significant degree – the knowledge and analyses that activists have shared with me, and which have been collectively produced over the course of the research. However, conceiving of the knowledge produced in research as an outcome of the articulation of the knowledges of researcher and researched is not the same as presenting the final product as a completely joint effort. This would be not only naïve but misleading. As Back (2007) warns, the currently widespread use of 'participatory' or 'dialogic' methods of sociological investigation often functions to conceal inevitable hierarchies and elide questions of power and authority. A written account in important respects might be the outcome of a dialogic process but, insofar as it is considered the final product of the research, it is still the author who gets to have the last word.

Ultimately, the analysis presented in an article, book, or thesis is the researcher's; acknowledging this is a matter of responsibility and accountability. What becomes important is to acknowledge the contribution of each party in the conversation and be explicit about one's sources. This can be conceptualised as akin to the practice of academic referencing and the importance that is placed on citing one's sources when developing a theoretical position; the emphasis being on the 'traceability' of the arguments that we make. It is for this reason that most of the interview quotations in the thesis are attributed fully to the person interviewed. This might appear to contravene established ethical conventions of anonymity and confidentiality. However, I quickly found that the majority of activists I

interviewed were not particularly concerned about anonymity; some were public figures within the WSF and I interviewed them as such, others made it clear that they actually wanted me to use their names.<sup>41</sup> In a movement milieu where openness and transparency are core values, being accountable for one's statements and opinions is an ideal that also extends to activists' participation in this research. By attributing their contributions properly, I hope to make clear that this thesis is in important ways the outcome of a collective process. The account presented in this thesis is, nonetheless, *my* interpretation, offered back to activists, scholars, and other publics as a contribution to ongoing debates.

### ***Conclusion***

What I hope the discussion above makes clear is that my methodology is an absolutely integral part of my research project. More than just a set of procedures to be applied at the different stages of research design, data collection, and analysis, methodology is intrinsically linked to the broader questions of politics, knowledge, and epistemology that form the substantive focus of the thesis. Premised on an understanding of the WSF as an epistemic project concerned with the affirmation of epistemic plurality, my research could not proceed simply on the basis of conventional methodological dictates which posit a hierarchy between researcher and researched and their different knowledges. Taking cue from the challenge that the WSF poses to dominant epistemologies, the methodological framework developed here attempts to move beyond such epistemologies and the hierarchy they posit between 'scientific' and 'other' forms of knowledge. Based on mobile positioning and situated conversations, it is an attempt to model sociological research on the innovative

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<sup>41</sup> Anonymity was always offered to interviewees and a small number preferred to remain anonymous.

knowledge practices of contemporary social movements. In the chapters that follow, I narrate the outcome of these situated conversations.

### 3. Breaking through the fissures? Communicating the WSF through mass media

*[C]ommunication continues to be a big challenge to the WSF process. We are still fighting to make the WSF better known and experienced all over the world, and to make the majorities aware that 'another world' is not only possible but it is necessary and urgent (Whitaker, 2008a: 90).*

*There are alternatives [emerging within the WSF process], from the economic alternatives to the discussion of renewable energy [...]. Those are a lot of potentially very interesting and good stories that can also generate emulation and cross-fertilisation etcetera, but they need to be communicated, and this is not [considered] a priority (Jason Nardi, interview, January 2010).<sup>42</sup>*

During its decade of existence, the WSF has performed a vital function as a space for the elaboration of alternatives to the neoliberal paradigm, from concrete practices at the level of everyday life to the construction of new organisational forms and political imaginaries. Between them, the actors that gather at social forums have a wealth of knowledge and proposals for how to make 'another possible world' a reality. As discussed in Chapter 1, the WSF might be conceived as an epistemic project with the potential to render visible alternative practices and knowledges that have been subalternised by hegemonic globalisation or which are currently only emergent. However, as Jason Nardi argues in the interview extract quoted above, these alternatives need to be *communicated*, otherwise they will remain exactly that – alternatives. If the WSF is to realise its global ambition, the discourses that circulate within it need to gain wider currency. In other words, the WSF public needs to be extended beyond the 'already converted'. As discussed in Chapter 1, publics might be conceived as constituted

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<sup>42</sup> Jason Nardi works for the Italian NGO Social Watch and is a member of the Communication Commission of the WSF International Council.

through the circulation of discourse, and membership of publics as determined on the basis of participation. Extending the WSF public thus depends on the discourses of the movements and groups that participate in the WSF reaching a wider audience and stimulating that audience to identify as part of a WSF public.

This chapter considers the possibility of extending the WSF public by communicating the knowledges and practices of WSF participants through mass media – commercial and public media with a mass audience which practice largely one-to-many communication and operate according to the market principle of maximising audience share. In one sense, there are good reasons to believe that the present historical moment offers favourable conditions for the discourses that circulate within the WSF to gain wider currency. The multiple crises that currently affect large parts of the world have highlighted the inadequacies of the existing economic and political order and contributed to delegitimising the neoliberal hegemony, potentially increasing receptivity to the alternatives proposed by the WSF. The present moment is an ambivalent one; fissures are emerging in hegemonic discourses, which might be exploited in order to reach out beyond the ‘already converted’ (Biccum, 2005; cf. Downey & Fenton, 2003).

However, the success of the WSF in gaining mass media coverage has been limited. Despite a widely shared perception among activists and scholars that ‘[g]iven its scope and breadth as well as its focus on some of the most urgent conflicts of our day, the WSF is arguably the most important social and political development of our time’ (Velitchkova, Smith, & Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2009: 194), this has not been reflected in media coverage around the world. This especially has been the case since the global edition of the Forum has ceased to be news in its own right. As Whitaker (2008a: 90) points out, the original decision to hold the WSF at the same time as the World Economic Forum was ‘something of a “countercommunications operation”’ intended to force global media to pay attention to those

challenging global elites. Initially, this strategy succeeded: the first WSF received considerable media coverage. Yet, as Whitaker highlights in the extract quoted at the beginning of this chapter, communication remains a big challenge for the WSF.

In this chapter, I seek to understand why this is the case by exploring the complexities of communicating the WSF through mass media. I begin by showing that the movement-media relationship, though difficult to negotiate for all oppositional actors, becomes particularly complicated in the case of the WSF. This is partly due to its 'founding principle' of respect for diversity and the emergent character of the knowledges that circulate within it, partly because of a 'mismatch' between the ambition to construct a global WSF public and the national (or subnational) scale at which most mass media operate. I then consider how the Forum's character as a supposedly horizontal global gathering with no formal leadership makes the question of who is responsible for communication rather fraught, and discuss the challenges involved in translating the knowledges and visions of WSF participants into 'storylines' that are compatible with dominant media frames while remaining faithful to the Charter of Principles. As will become apparent, a key problem is the lack of a shared communication strategy. Having identified the key challenges with regards to the *who* and the *what* of engaging with mass media, I move on to explore how some of these dynamics manifest themselves in practice through a case study of the WSF 2009, which illustrates the difficulties of adopting the kind of international media strategy that is required in order to engage with mass media. I conclude by suggesting that while the WSF might be able to gain more mass media coverage if it adopts a more coherent communication strategy, it is unlikely to have any significant success in extending the WSF public solely through mass media.

## ***The WSF and ‘mainstream’ media***

Paradoxically, just as history is proving the World Social Forum right in many of its predictions and analyses, the major media, those ‘shapers of public opinion’, are not increasing but in fact sharply decreasing their coverage of it. This silent treatment is a clear obstacle to the expansion of the WSF and a cause of real concern for many of its innumerable organisers and participants (Lutbetkin, 2011: n. p.).

The local press, it’s absurd how it has this very narrow outlook, only wanting numbers, numbers, numbers. How much waste was produced, how many joints were smoked... The coverage was very superficial, especially the local press didn’t provide much of an outlet for the real debates (Kélem Cabral, interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

In the quotes above, Mario Lutbetkin, director of Inter Press Service (IPS), and Kélem Cabral, who was the coordinator of the communication team of the Belém WSF office, each highlight a key difficulty that the WSF faces in terms of dealing with mass media. Not only does it suffer from a lack of visibility; insofar as it does receive coverage, this is frequently distorted and superficial. These problems are, of course, not unique to the WSF: as shown in Chapter 1, the difficulties experienced by social movements in getting their messages across in the media have been well documented. However, the movement-media relationship takes on a particularly complicated character in the case of the WSF, for a number of reasons.

First, while internal heterogeneity is a ‘problem’ for movements in general, it becomes particularly acute for the WSF, which Charter of Principles formalises the principle of respect for internal diversity. The Forum’s somewhat paradoxical status as a space that is not an entity in itself, but still a recognisable and nameable phenomenon, makes its relationship to mass media particularly complicated. In contrast to, for example, large NGOs, which tend to be formed around specific issues and often develop highly sophisticated communication strategies executed by dedicated staff, the WSF does not have a single message and cannot ‘act’ in the way that an organisation can. The Forum’s status as an ‘open space’ means that it does not have a central leadership (at least not formally) and it is not

clear who is responsible for communication. The assertion of the Charter of Principles that no-one can speak in the name of the WSF also raises the question of whether any particular actors *can* have such a responsibility.

Second, the epistemic distance that exists between the WSF and hegemonic constructions of social reality makes it very difficult to communicate to mass media. This arises partly from the emergent character of many of the knowledges that circulate within it, partly from the Forum's character as an open-ended process with a myriad of actors and issues – both of which make it difficult to comprehend within dominant news frames. Attracting media attention therefore necessitates a proactive approach: translating the knowledges and practices that exist within the WSF to stories that resonate with prevailing media frames and actively promoting these to journalists and editors. This kind of directive approach is, however, problematic in the context of the WSF, because it is perceived by many as contradicting the principles of horizontality and autonomy associated with the open space concept.

In addition to these questions, which essentially revolve around *who* communicates the WSF and *what* is communicated, a broader question concerns what it actually means to engage with mass media in the context of the WSF. Reflecting common-sense usage, such media tend to be referred to as 'mainstream media' among activists and organisers. However, like 'alternative media' against which it is often defined, 'mainstream media' is a somewhat vague term. Within the WSF it has different connotations for different people; moreover, gaining coverage in such media is far from a consensual objective. Alternative media activists often use 'mainstream media' as shorthand for what they are against: market logics, dominant ideology, and one-way communication to a largely passive mass audience. For activists who work to develop alternative models of communication based on a wholly different logic, seeking coverage in mass media runs counter to their fundamental principles. Others take

a more pragmatic approach, emphasising the strategic value of being able to reach mass audiences and the need to 'play the game' in order to get messages across. Some within this latter camp maintain a distinction between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' media and see engaging with the latter as a necessary evil; others question the appropriateness of a clear-cut distinction. As one activist explained,

I don't think we can divide the mainstream media from the others, because of the internet and because of the bloggers and because of Facebook, it's not that time, that time is past. We have no more alternative media, we are all in the same spaghetti bowl and we have to manage it (Monica Di Sisto, interview, January 2010).<sup>43</sup>

Questions about the desirability of engaging with 'mainstream' media aside,<sup>44</sup> given the ambivalence of the term, might it be more illuminating to deploy the conceptual distinction between 'general' and 'counter' publics? As discussed in Chapter 1, counterpublics are defined as such by virtue of their self-consciously oppositional (and often subordinate) position vis-à-vis general publics, whereas general publics are supposedly universal spheres that in principle (though not in practice) include all members of a given polity. Put differently, counterpublics are constituted through the circulation of oppositional discourses, general publics through the circulation of hegemonic discourses. Thus conceived, it is possible to say that the infrastructure for general public spheres is provided *primarily* by mass media (while acknowledging that hegemonic discourses also circulate elsewhere), whereas counterpublic spheres consist partly of space made available in such media, and partly of various alternative media (cf. Dahlgren, 1995: 156). In other words, mass media might

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<sup>43</sup> Monica Di Sisto is the coordinator of FAIR, an Italian NGO that works on issues of fair trade and provides guidance on communication to small fair trade businesses and other organisations. FAIR was contracted by the Communication Commission to work on press relations in connection with the Global Day of Action in 2008 and played a key role in facilitating international media coverage of the WSF 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Chapter 5 looks in more detail at debates among alternative media activists regarding whether and to what extent to devote energies to achieving mass media coverage. The present chapter is primarily concerned with the practices and ideas of those who see engaging with mass media as a worthwhile endeavour.

be conceived as constituting a sphere in which the two kinds of publics potentially overlap; a sphere in which social movements may seek to engage with a general public beyond the 'already converted'.

Extending the WSF public through mass media, then, means taking advantage of space made available in such media to gain visibility within general publics and engender a sense of identification with the WSF among such publics. Such a project is, however, complicated by a 'mismatch' between the WSF's global ambition and the scales at which most mass media operate. As discussed in Chapter 1, mediated publics constituted by mass media are predominantly national in orientation, which makes it very difficult to conceive of a general public sphere in the form of a unified communication space at the global scale. Insofar as news travel between different national contexts, mediated publics might be conceived as *international*, but it is not really possible to speak of a global mediated public as such. Extending the WSF public through mass media, then, seems to require going *via* national (or subnational) public spheres and generating a sense of belonging to a global WSF public among those publics (cf. Nash, 2009). In other words, if mass media are *international*, an *international* media strategy is required. As we shall see, however, this has been difficult to implement in the context of the WSF.

In what follows, I explore the issues outlined above in more detail, beginning with the question of who communicates the WSF.

### ***Can a space speak? Who communicates the WSF?***

As a space common to all, [the WSF] does not 'speak', or rather, it 'speaks' a lot through its very existence. As more and more people and organisations get together in order to find ways to overcome neoliberalism, this in itself is an expressive political fact. Nobody, therefore, needs to speak on behalf of the Forum (Whitaker, 2008: 84).

The problem is [...] the way that the Forum is structured, which is an informal gathering, makes it very difficult to understand who is responsible for what and accountable to whom [...]. In communication this is essential (Jason Nardi, interview, February 2009).

How can a space communicate? If the forum is not an actor, how can it convey a message to wider society? How can it tell a story? According to Melucci's (1996: 9) well-known formulation, '[c]ollective action, by the sheer fact of its existence, represents in its very form and models of organization a message broadcast to the rest of society'. It is perhaps this line of argument that Whitaker has in mind when he suggests that the WSF 'speaks' through its very existence. While to a certain extent this is undoubtedly the case – the way in which the idea of open space and the claim that 'another world is possible' have caught the imagination of activists around the world testifies to this – the Forum's lack of visibility in mass media suggests that the message that it represents *in itself* is not necessarily enough.

Since its inception, organisers and communication activists have grappled with the question of how to communicate the WSF and who might be responsible for this. One challenge that organisers face in trying to give visibility to the ideas and initiatives of Forum participants is a widespread sense that they cannot be seen to favour particular issues and actors over others. During the first WSF, organisers played an instrumental role in coordinating media coverage by launching the Ciranda initiative, which provided an online platform for alternative media content.<sup>45</sup> This was coordinated from within the office of the forum organising committee, with staff acting as editors. After the first WSF, however, there was a strong sense that in order to comply with the Charter of Principles, media coverage – whether 'alternative' or 'mainstream' – could not be done by the organising committee. As one Brazilian forum organiser explained:

It cannot be official in the sense of being in the name of the forum organisers. They are initiatives of the movements and the actors, the media actors, to cover the forum but it's not forum coverage [...]. So it's their perspective on the forum, not the organisers' perspective (interview, 2009).

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<sup>45</sup> | discuss Ciranda in Chapter 5.

Arising from the recognition that media coverage is never simply neutral reporting of facts as it always involves framing, this line of reasoning established the principle that the role of forum organisers should be to make information available in order to facilitate the production of media coverage by others, but not to produce coverage themselves.<sup>46</sup> In practice, the separation between purely informative communication and more value-laden media coverage is of course not so clear-cut, nor is the division of labour just outlined. As the WSF has grown in size and complexity, and particularly after it left its birthplace in Porto Alegre and 'globalised', it has developed rather complex and frequently changing internal structures, leaving lines of responsibility blurred. In particular, the question of who at the transnational level is responsible for communicating the WSF has remained unclear.

Initially, the WSF was coordinated almost entirely at the national level. The first WSF had an organising committee made up of eight Brazilian organisations,<sup>47</sup> supported by a São Paulo-based administrative secretariat and an office in Porto Alegre that dealt with logistical matters, which was responsible for all aspects of the event. With the addition of the International Council (IC), which was created in June 2001, the same structure remained in place for the second WSF. However, with a growing understanding of the WSF as a global process and the decision to hold the fourth WSF in India, it was felt that a more permanent body was needed at the transnational level – in addition to the IC and the national or local organising committees responsible for specific forum events – to support the WSF as an ongoing process.

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<sup>46</sup> Similarly, organisers of the European Social Forum have rejected the idea of an 'official' voice of the Forum (Mosca et al., 2009).

<sup>47</sup> These were the Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (ABONG), Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens (ATTAC), Brazilian Justice and Peace Commission (CBJP), Brazilian Business Association for Citizenship (CIVES), Central Trade Union Federation (CUT), Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Studies (IBASE), Centre for Global Justice (CJG), and the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST).

This transnational body has existed in various incarnations. In 2003, the group of eight Brazilian organisations took on this responsibility, going by the name of the WSF Secretariat. (What had previously been referred to as the secretariat in São Paulo became the 'WSF office'.) During the build-up to the WSF 2004 in Mumbai, the Secretariat was expanded to include representatives from the Indian organising committee. This International Secretariat continued operating until the June 2005 meeting of the IC, when it was decided not to renew its mandate. As a result, the WSF did not have a transnational 'process' body for the following two years, until the Liaison Group – made up of representatives from sixteen IC member organisations reflecting the regional and thematic composition of the IC – was set up in July 2007 and given the mandate of facilitating communication between the different instances of the WSF and driving the Forum process forward.<sup>48</sup> The mandate of the Liaison Group was renewed in May 2010, with some changes made to its composition.<sup>49</sup>

The WSF office in São Paulo, meanwhile, has constituted the only permanent physical reference point for the Forum but this also has undergone a series of changes. Initially, the São Paulo office operated as the administrative extension of the Brazilian organising committee. As the latter became the WSF Secretariat, with separate

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<sup>48</sup> The first Liaison Group was made up of representatives from the following organisations and countries: Hemispheric Social Alliance, Mexico; ARCI (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association), Italy; *Articulación Feminista Marcosur*, Peru; CBJP (Brazilian Justice and Peace Commission), Brazil; COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), South Africa; CUT (Central Trade Union Federation), Brazil; *Encuentros Hemisféricos*, Cuba; ENDA (Environment and Development Action in the Third World), Senegal; Focus on the Global South, India; IBASE (Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Studies), Brazil; ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation), Belgium; KCTU (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions), South Korea; OCLAE (Continental Organisation of Latin American and Caribbean Students), Brazil; *Terre des Hommes*, Belgium; World March of Women, South Africa.

<sup>49</sup> The second Liaison Group was made up of representatives from the following organisations and countries: ARCI, Italy; *Articulación Feminista Marcosur*, Peru; CADTM (Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt), Belgium; CBJP, Brazil; Ciranda, Brazil; CUT, Brazil; *Encuentros Hemisféricos*, Cuba; ENDA, Senegal; *Forum des Alternatives Maroc*, Morocco; FDIM (Women International Democratic Federation), Brazil; ITUC, Belgium; ITUC, Brazil; KCTU, South Korea; OCLAE, Brazil (two representatives).

responsibilities from those of the organising committees of specific forum events, the role of the São Paulo office was redefined as being to provide administrative support to the WSF process. Between 2005 and 2007, in the absence of a transnational 'process' body, the São Paulo office was the only intermediary between the different instances of the WSF and played a particularly important role in coordinating the different editions of the polycentric WSF in 2006. As of July 2007, the office answers formally to the Liaison Group, although it has not always been clear what its exact responsibilities are. Further complicating matters, the São Paulo office went through drastic changes in spring 2008, as ABONG, which had up until then funded the salaries of the office staff, withdrew its funding.<sup>50</sup> As a result, the person who had acted as the office coordinator since the first WSF left and the office continued to operate with a much reduced staff. At the time of writing (September 2011), it has three members of staff.

The question of *who* communicates the WSF has to be understood in the context of these developments. Complex internal structures and frequent changes have all contributed to a lack of clarity about responsibilities. There has been a general understanding that the WSF office in São Paulo is responsible for informative communication relating to the WSF process at a global scale, which includes facilitating internal communication among IC members, maintaining the main WSF website, and producing a regular news bulletin in four languages about social forums and other related events. Similar 'official' communication relating to specific forum events has generally been understood to be the responsibility of the organising committee for each event. What has been less clear is the question of who – if anyone – should be responsible for promoting the WSF to mass media, especially at the transnational level.

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<sup>50</sup> This followed on from a financial crisis caused by a large deficit incurred by the WSF 2005, for which ABONG, having acted as legal signatory for the event budget, ended up with almost sole responsibility.

The main transnational entity of the WSF that does have a mandate to deal with communication is the IC Communication Commission. This was created in July 2003 at the meeting of the IC in Miami, alongside five other commissions: Strategy, Content, Methodology, Expansion and Finance (later Resources). Partly conceived as a way to enable more IC organisations to get actively involved in the WSF process, these were open to all IC members wishing to contribute in a particular area.<sup>51</sup> The remit of the Communication Commission was defined in rather broad terms:

Creation of communication system for information/dissemination about the WSF process both in terms of communication to actors outside of the IC as well as within the IC itself, identifying ways for the IC and its Commissions to develop an effective long distance work (World Social Forum, 2003b: para. (e)).

In subsequent years, members of the Communication Commission have been involved in a broad range of projects, from organising alternative media coverage of social forums, to developing websites and other mechanisms for internal communication, to engaging with mass media. While working groups within the Commission have developed plans for various projects, the Commission itself arguably has not had a single unified vision or strategy. Rather, it has operated as a forum for discussion and collaboration among activists who sometimes have quite different visions and understandings of what communication is and should be.

What has remained unclear, and sometimes the subject of controversy, has been the question of whether the Communication Commission should have an executive function within the WSF or act only in an advisory capacity towards its different instances. One central tenet of this debate has revolved around the question of whether the WSF, which is not supposed to have a central authority,

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<sup>51</sup> The Communication Commission from the outset also has been open to non-IC members who wish to contribute to its work.

can actually have a body at the transnational level with responsibility for communication. The following extract from an email report to the IC from a member of the Communication Commission, which refers to discussions held by the Commission during the April 2004 IC meeting in Parma, Italy, is telling:

The committee [*sic*] met twice, with different participants in both instances. The first meeting discussed the communications plan that I had submitted to the committee [*sic*]. While no one had problems regarding the plan itself, some participants seriously questioned the legitimacy of the WSF having a communications plan, because this would imply the assumption of an authority from a center to a periphery of receivers (Source: WSF office, São Paulo).

The communications plan in question put forward a number of different proposals, including: facilitating internal communication within the IC and between the IC and WSF participants; creating a global database of journalists, ‘feeding’ them with articles on topics relating to the WSF throughout the year and providing them with a press pack in advance of each forum event; and supporting independent radio and TV coverage of the WSF (*Communications plan for the WSF*, 2004). Though diverse in scope, and clearly covering more than just communicating to mass media, the proposals all imply a significant degree of central coordination at the transnational level of the WSF, and the legitimacy of such a model appears to have been questioned by those attending the April 2004 meeting. According to the email quoted above, the outcome of this particular discussion was that the communications plan would be owned and implemented by the Brazilian Secretariat, which, being ‘responsible for the success of the 2005 WSF’, could legitimately do so in relation to that particular event. The broader question of who might be responsible for communication relating to the global WSF process appears to have been left unresolved.

Subsequently, however, the Communication Commission assumed more of an executive role. In January 2007 it was granted a mandate by the IC to fundraise for and implement a communication

plan for the WSF 2008, which took the form of a decentralised Global Day of Action (GDA) with around 1000 self-organised activities taking place in over 80 different countries (World Social Forum, 2008). With no central forum event taking place in a bounded physical territory, communication was fundamental to the WSF 2008 being perceived as a global event.<sup>52</sup> The Communication Commission therefore played a vital role in the organisation of the GDA, with member organisations assuming formal responsibility for budgets and implementation.<sup>53</sup> The Commission helped develop a website where participants could report on actions and upload content,<sup>54</sup> organised alternative media coverage, and – most importantly for the purposes of this chapter – contracted FAIR, an Italian NGO that works on issues of fair trade and communication, to help develop and coordinate a strategy for engaging with international mass media. This involved developing a ‘press pool’ of press officers and other representatives of WSF member organisations to help promote the GDA in their respective countries, producing and disseminating press releases in different languages, and organising press conferences to announce the GDA. According to an evaluation document, ‘23 press conferences were held on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January in 4 continents in a totally decentralized way – but with common press releases, locally adapted’ (Jason Nardi, personal communication, August 2011).

Building on the experience of the GDA, the Communication Commission has tried to implement similar strategies in subsequent years. In connection with the WSF 2009, members of the Commission formed a small team which tried to coordinate international press relations, and in preparation for the WSF 2010, which took the form of a ‘calendar of events’ taking place around the world throughout the year, members of the same team created a ‘Virtual Media Centre’

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<sup>52</sup> I discuss the way in which communication contributed to creating a sense of globality during the WSF 2008 in Chapter 7.

<sup>53</sup> The Commission itself, having no legal status as a body, cannot perform these functions.

<sup>54</sup> [www.wsf2008.net](http://www.wsf2008.net) (the site is no longer operational in its original form).

website ([www.worldsocialforum.info](http://www.worldsocialforum.info)) containing news reports and other press materials. Similarly, at the WSF 2011 in Dakar a small team from the Communication Commission worked together with local organisers to promote the forum, providing press kits and organising press conferences.

In many respects, the strategies that Communication Commission members have tried to implement for engaging with mass media may be characterised as *international* – particularly in 2008 when it involved mobilising a network of press contacts in different countries, producing common but ‘locally adapted’ press releases, and organising simultaneous press conferences which were aimed at national or local media in different countries. However, as I discuss in more detail later with reference to the WSF 2009, it has not proved easy to implement properly such an international media strategy. A recurrent complaint among members of the Communication Commission has revolved around a perceived lack of commitment and appreciation of the importance of communication among forum organisers and other members of the IC. Although in principle, given its supposedly horizontal character, all IC members are responsible for communicating the WSF, the work of actively promoting the Forum to international mass media has in practice been assumed mostly by a handful of committed individuals connected to the Communication Commission. However, this group has been keen to stress that it is not a ‘central’ body for the WSF as a whole with ‘official’ responsibility for international media relations. The following extract from a draft proposal for international media facilitation for the WSF 2010 is telling in this respect:

The task of this group is not to be an official press office for the whole WSF, but to stimulate and allow – through a decentralised coordination – people working in the press to build their story by making information on the WSF2010 available in comprehensive and multi-language formats (WSF Communication Commission, 2010: 1).

In summary, the complex and frequently changing governance structures of the WSF combined with its character as a supposedly horizontal gathering with no central authority make it very difficult to designate clear lines of responsibility. What appears to be the outcome of this is that very few actors within the WSF take responsibility for communication. Also arising from the open space format are dilemmas relating to the question of *what* to communicate.

### ***What's the story? Framing the Forum***

[Y]ou have to facilitate the news making process, so you have to create some headlines, to create some news. The social forum is not a tsunami, but it has in itself relevance, mass relevance, a mass of useful information for the general public. But you have to make it attractive (Monica Di Sisto, interview, January 2009).

*Buen vivir* is completely different from the economic measures we have used until now [...] but we have to work hard on that, because it's not so easy to communicate it, it is not so easy for the mainstream media to understand it well (Monica Di Sisto, interview, January 2010).

As outlined in Chapter 1, mass media operate with criteria of newsworthiness that emphasise novelty, human interest, conflict, and spectacle, and which favour actors and issues that already have public recognition; these criteria determine to a large extent what gets reported. Gaining access to mass media depends, as Monica Di Sisto suggests in the interview extract quoted above, on converting the wealth of knowledge that exists within the WSF into attractive news stories. Attracting media interest requires taking a proactive approach; selecting particularly interesting events, groups or issues, framing these to fit news criteria, and promoting them actively to journalists and editors.

However, the nature of the WSF and the emergent character of the visions that are being developed within it make it very difficult to frame in mainstream terms. While the first editions of the WSF

satisfied many conventional criteria of newsworthiness – it was something completely new, it positioned itself in direct opposition to the World Economic Forum, and had a clear message ('another world is possible') – and therefore attracted considerable media interest, the Forum's visibility declined in subsequent years as it was no longer perceived as a novelty. The simple fact of people meeting to discuss social and political issues is not in itself news in terms of conventional media frames, and as the objectives of the WSF shifted from a simple assertion of opposition to neoliberal globalisation towards analysis and elaboration of alternatives, the complexities of the issues involved have made the Forum difficult to package for mass media.

With the WSF having to a large extent disappeared from the global agenda after 2005, the location of the WSF 2009 and the political conjuncture in which it occurred provided favourable conditions for attracting media attention. According to Jason Nardi, the WSF received significantly more international media coverage in 2009 than in the previous four years (interview, February 2009). The decision to hold the WSF in the Amazon was a strategic choice; the symbolic resonance of the region providing a powerful means for drawing attention to environmental degradation and climate change. Combined with the political and economic conjuncture created by the global financial crisis in 2008, this provided a unique opportunity to raise the profile of the WSF as a source of alternatives to the capitalist model of economic growth. Monica Di Sisto assessed the significance of the WSF 2009 in the following terms:

The last World Social Forum in Belém gave us the possibility to have a huge visibility [...] because of things like the presidents,<sup>55</sup> and because [...] the suggestive framework of the Amazon gave us a wonderful occasion to raise

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<sup>55</sup> One of the main news stories from the WSF 2009 was a meeting of four left-wing Latin American presidents - Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales, Ecuador's Rafael Correa and Paraguay's Ferdinand Lugo - that was convened by the MST (Landless Worker's Movement) on January 29 as a parallel activity that was not officially part of the WSF.

new awareness of the process that was very low before the Belém World Social Forum. Now the game is open and we have to play it (interview, January 2010).

In terms of how this game might be played, Di Sisto emphasised the potential of communication not only for disseminating information about concrete alternatives but also for disseminating

some kind of new... imaginary, because [...] they are not just concrete alternatives, and this is the reason why communication can create a fantastic road, to make them work, because they are not just, you know, doing fair trade or doing a good chocolate for everyone, and so on, or a fantastic agricultural system [...]. It is also to create a positive approach to the future, starting from something completely different (interview, January 2010).

What might this 'something completely different' be? A key current of thought to emerge out of the Belém forum was the concept of *buen vivir*.<sup>56</sup> Developed by indigenous peoples in Latin America, *buen vivir* encompasses a complex philosophy of life, key elements of which include a holistic view of human and natural worlds as interconnected, a commitment to sustainability and living in harmony with 'Mother Earth', and the acknowledgement of and respect for epistemic plurality. It is based on a rejection of Western notions of development and underdevelopment, definitions of wealth and poverty in material terms, and – perhaps most importantly – the principle of economic growth that underpins both capitalism and socialism. In short, it is exemplary of the kind of emergent knowledges that the WSF, as 'Epistemology of the South', makes manifest through the sociologies of absences and emergences (Santos, 2006b).

*Buen vivir*, then, offers a worldview that is completely different from modern political imaginaries, and has significant potential as a starting point for the positive approach to the future that

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<sup>56</sup> The literal English translation is 'good living'. *Buen vivir* is itself an approximate translation of the Ecuadorian Kichwa term *sumak kawsay* (translator's note by Christopher Read in Bizerra, 2009).

communication might help create. However, as Monica Di Sisto suggests in the interview extract quoted at the beginning of this section, the epistemic distance that exists between *buen vivir* and the hegemonic visions of society that underpin mass media discourses makes this very difficult. As discussed in Chapter 1, mass media play a significant role in maintaining the hegemony of dominant groups, by packaging events and issues in accordance with taken-for-granted interpretations of social reality and thereby rendering knowledges and visions that do not fit within hegemonic frameworks non-credible or simply invisible. The vision of *buen vivir*, having emerged from a very different epistemic context, is therefore extremely difficult to communicate in a way that resonates with dominant media frames.

The emergent character of the knowledges and visions that exist within it, then, is one reason why the WSF is difficult to communicate. Another is the character of the Forum itself: its political logic and organisational forms are also very different from hegemonic conceptions of 'politics' and 'organisation'. The WSF's character as an open-ended process with no elected leaders and no final declarations makes it very difficult to comprehend from within dominant news frameworks which demand concrete results and proposals.

In the last edition of the World Social Forum we stressed, I think too much, the idea that we will give you the answer to the crisis. We stressed too much, until the [point] that several mainstream media, for example the Economist, were waiting for the answer. They were waiting for the concrete answer, and at the end when they realised that the answer is a *process*, they were upset, they didn't understand (Monica Di Sisto, interview, January 2010).

As well as making it difficult to comprehend within dominant news frames, the WSF's organisational format also has consequences for how forum organisers think they should relate to mass media. As Di Sisto highlights in the interview extract quoted at the beginning of this section, attracting the attention of mass media requires active facilitation and news *making*; however, this kind of directive approach is problematic in the context of the WSF. Notwithstanding the

difficulty of identifying particular issues and actors among the myriad that circulate within the WSF; highlighting some actors and not others, and then representing their issues in such a way that they resonate with dominant media frames, is perceived by many as fundamentally contradicting the principles of horizontality and autonomy that are central to the idea of open space. As one Brazilian forum organiser explained, ‘with the mainstream media you have to try to direct, guide... but at the same time if you make visible some issues [and not others] then the movements are going to [...] complain about it’ (interview, 2009).

The open space concept, then, not only complicates the issue of *who* communicates the WSF; it has also made some forum organisers reluctant to actively promote specific actors and issues. This line of thinking is illustrated very well by the following extract from an interview with a member of the communication team of the WSF 2009 organising committee:

H: Why can the Forum not divulge more specific things?

K: Because of the principle of equality. We had 2350 activities registered... no, it was 2130 in the end. If I divulged one, I would have had to divulge the other 2129. This was humanly impossible.

(Interview with Kélem Cabral, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese)

While the reluctance of many WSF actors to promote particularly interesting or important issues to a wider audience might arise from a commitment to diversity, in practice this wish to avoid exclusion often results in paralysis – or, as one Communication Commission member phrased it, what amounts to ‘self-censorship’ (informal conversation, 2010). Some have gone further in their criticism, suggesting that the diversity argument is also used by some actors within the WSF as an excuse for not having to make decisions and take responsibility:

Hilde: So the reason for not doing coverage *by* the Forum is that [...] the Forum can't be seen to be making political decisions about what to cover? Is this it?

Interviewee: This is one of the things, yes. Because the Forum... In fact it's a

lack of responsibility, I mean, a lack of commitment also from the organising committee towards communication, especially towards the relation with the mainstream media [...]. A lot of people in the IC, their position is that we don't have to, we have to give space to everything, but as a political body, if it is a political body, you have to emphasise some things, at least some general...some general approach you have to have.  
(Interview with Brazilian forum organiser, 2009)

Whether it comes from a somewhat inflexible interpretation of the Charter of Principles or a lack of political commitment to communication, the practical implication of the argument that the Forum *qua* Forum cannot highlight particular groups or issues over others is that the task of communicating the WSF to the mass media becomes very complicated. Combined with the lack of clarity about *who* is responsible for communicating the WSF, the overall outcome is that the WSF as a whole does not have a collectively agreed strategy for dealing with mass media. The following section explores some of the ways in which this lack of strategy manifests itself in practice through a case study of the WSF 2009 in Belém, focusing on the challenges involved in trying to adopt an international approach to dealing with mass media and the difficulties faced by the communication team of the Belém WSF office in dealing with local media.

### ***Communicating the Belém WSF***

It has been hard to establish a continuous and effective communication with the Belém press office before arriving in Belém, to coordinate the press conferences and materials around the 'enlarging Belém' network. It has been possible just at a 'day by day' level, to organize how to work on Belém events [...] and we succeeded to support the international media just with the support of a few of the [Communication Commission] members who were present in Belém and available for some time in the Media center (WSF Communication Commission, 2009: 28).

All of us, we constructed the forum intuitively, instinctively. We didn't have a manual, how to organise a forum, first this, second this, you know? We had general lines, knocked our heads together, worked and constructed (Kélem Cabral, interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

In many respects, the strategies that members of the Communication Commission have tried to develop and implement may be characterised as international; in particular, the approach adopted for the GDA in 2008, which entailed mobilising an international press pool, producing common press releases adapted to local contexts, and organising press conferences in different countries aimed at national or local media. Building on their experience from 2008, the Communication Commission's press team attempted to implement a similar strategy for the WSF 2009. In the months and weeks leading up to the event, staff at FAIR, which again took a lead in coordinating the international media work, attempted to mobilise an international network of contacts that could work in a decentralised manner to promote the WSF in their respective countries. As the team's evaluation report suggests, however, this enjoyed limited success:

Two [FAIR staff] worked to support the Communication Commission to identify press officers/resources from the organizations involved in the WSF process able to support a participatory communication strategy at national/international level but very few has [*sic*] been the entities strongly engaged in those activities (WSF Communication Commission, 2009: 27).

Though the press team did manage to mobilise a small number of people for the press pool, by engaging Communication Commission members and other contacts, they did not have the same response from organisations involved in the WSF as in 2008. This also meant they were unable to coordinate the same number of press conferences as in the previous year. Compared to the 23 press conferences held internationally to announce the GDA in 2008, there were fewer than ten in 2009. The explanation offered by Jason Nardi as to why it was more difficult to mobilise an international network in 2009 is telling:

We had hoped of course [to have] many more [press conferences], but there was a difficulty in what to communicate and also in getting the group engaged again in something they felt less theirs. [For] the Global Day of Action they had local actions so there was something to communicate to their public, in this case it's an event happening somewhere else in the world, [in

the] jungle, so it was a bit more difficult (interview, February 2009).

Efforts to promote the Belém forum to international mass media were also hampered by a lack of communication between the Communication Commission press team and the communication team of the local organising committee in Belém. Essentially an exercise in translation, the work of communicating the proposals of organisations and movements in the Amazon to international media depended to a significant degree on collaboration and information sharing between the local organisers and the international press team. However, as the extract from the Commission's evaluation report quoted at the beginning of this section suggests, there was little interaction between the two groups prior to the forum. According to the Commission's report, this was due to a lack of response from the local organisers:

We regularly met via Skype weekly to enlarge the working press pool, trying to engage each organization available to offer their contribution to contents and issues. We tried to offer our support to the local press office in Belem, offering International briefings, translated contributions and clipping, but the response from this staff before the event has been very poor (WSF Communication Commission, 2009: 27).

Members of the Belém communication team, meanwhile, emphasised the difficult conditions under which they were working and the impossibility of meeting what they perceived as sometimes unreasonable demands from Communication Commission members (interviews, February 2009). Made up of only two professional staff members and two interns, all long-term residents of Belém or the surrounding area, the team had an overwhelming workload, being responsible not only for press relations but also for a variety of operational aspects, including the WSF 2009 website (in four languages), the forum media centre, and press accreditation. The team's ability to participate in the Commission's online discussions was also hampered by the seemingly mundane but nonetheless

crucial fact that it was impossible, due to a fragile internet connection, to use Skype in the Belém WSF office.

Another contributing factor might have been the rather different perceptions that the two groups had of their position within the WSF process. In contrast to members of the Communication Commission, who operate at the transnational level of the WSF and whose involvement in the forum process is more long-term, members of the Belém team, who were contracted specifically for the 2009 event, did not necessarily conceive of themselves as part of a global WSF process in the same way. As one member of the team explained, 'we from the office here work for the forum [in Belém], and not for the IC, the IC's relationship is more with the office in São Paulo' (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese). Combined with the lack of communication between the two groups, the outcome of this perceived separation between the (local) event and (global) process dimensions of the WSF was a division of labour whereby the work of dealing with international media was done by a handful of people connected to the Communication Commission while the Belém team concentrated on local media.<sup>57</sup>

As well as hampering efforts to communicate the forum to international media, this separation also complicated the work of dealing with local media. None of the small communication team in Belém had previous experience of organising social forums, and as Kélem Cabral suggests in the interview extract quoted at the beginning of this section, they ended up working with little guidance from more experienced activists on how to 'do' forum communication. (The loss of experienced staff from the São Paulo office in spring 2008 compounded this problem.) As a result, the team proceeded to a large extent on the basis of instinct, trial and error, and the experience of the two professional staff members, both

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<sup>57</sup> By 'local media' I refer to newspapers and broadcasters covering the city of Belém and the Brazilian state of Pará, of which Belém is the capital.

of whom had a background from conventional media (working, respectively, for a local newspaper and a local television station). Combined with the lack of dialogue with the Communication Commission, the absence of a shared communication strategy within the WSF as a whole meant that there was a lack of clarity about responsibilities and objectives at the local level.

H: In general, what are the objectives of the communication of the forum, or of the communication that you did here?

K: This is a good question [laughs]. I must confess I never knew how to respond to that, because I didn't know exactly what my function was. (Interview with Kélem Cabral, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese)

From what they had been told and gleaned from reports from previous forums, the Belém communication team were well aware of the principle that 'official' Forum communication should be informative in character and not highlight particular actors or issues to the detriment of others. This definition was, however, of little value as a source of guidance on how to respond to the constant demand they received from journalists for information about events, contact details, interviews with spokespersons, and so on. In practice, the team ended up taking on what might be described as the role of a press office, but without a collectively agreed strategy. Decisions on what information to provide were often made on an ad hoc basis according to demand, rather than on the basis of previously agreed criteria. The open space 'maxim' of not highlighting specific actors for fear of being exclusionary played an important part in this respect. As one member of the team explained, 'in order not to divulge one to the detriment of another, valorise one and devalue another, we tried to facilitate the access of the press to the event that they demanded' (Kélem Cabral, interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

In addition to this lack of clarity about their roles and what they could do legitimately as forum organisers, the ability of the Belém communication team to take a proactive approach was further

constrained by the nature of the local media coverage. Misinformation about the forum was a regular occurrence, the local media being concerned mostly with numbers, costs, and what was perceived as organisational shortcomings. The WSF was very much framed in 'event' rather than 'issue' terms, with the media focusing on the likely social and economic impact of the forum on the city – particularly in relation to issues like hotel capacity, traffic, and security – to the detriment of the substantive issues raised by participating movements and organisations.<sup>58</sup>

The local media's framing of the forum was further distorted as a consequence of the strong presence of the Worker's Party (PT) controlled government of Pará in the organisation of the event. The relationship of the WSF to the Brazilian state always has been controversial, with government agencies in practice playing a much more central role – financially, logistically, and many would argue politically – than the Forum's status as a civil society initiative in theory allows for. Owing to a shortage of funding from other sources, the WSF 2009 ended up relying even more on state support than previous forums in Porto Alegre, with a support committee set up by the Pará government taking responsibility for most infrastructural aspects. Keen for PT to be associated with the WSF, the committee did little to discourage the media from representing the forum as a government initiative. In addition to drawing attention away from the role of social movements and NGOs, a further consequence of this was that the forum became embroiled in local political disputes, with the right wing press framing it in negative terms as a means of trying to destabilise the government.

In this context, dealing with the local media was highly problematic. The Belém communication team spent a significant

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<sup>58</sup> Leung (2009) describes a similar process taking place in the context of the 2005 meeting of the WTO in Hong Kong. She uses the concept of 'news indigenization' to account for the way in which the local press 'proximated' the WTO meeting to (what it perceived as) local concerns, by focusing primarily on the protests surrounding the event while largely ignoring the issues being debated.

proportion of their time putting out fires, correcting misleading information that went out in the press. Particularly problematic was the widespread perception of the WSF as organised by the government. This meant a lot of effort went into simply explaining the WSF's character as a civil society initiative, to the extent that this became one of the team's main strategies:

H: Was there some kind of strategy for presenting a particular image of the forum, or telling people what the forum was?

M: Yes, the main strategy was to separate the forum from the government, to explain that the forum was not an event made by the government of Pará, it was made by the civil society.

(Interview with Melina Marcelino, February 2009)<sup>59</sup>

The ability of the Belém communication team to take a proactive approach in dealing with the local media was, then, constrained by the confluence of a number of factors. The absence of clear guidelines, pressures of immediate operational demands, and the rather closed and superficial discourse that circulated in the media left little room for manoeuvre. This did not mean that there were no attempts at all to challenge dominant media frames:

When we were asked how many [...] jobs the forum generated, how much money the forum will leave in the city, our response was that the World Social Forum is not a financial event, it is not a tourist event. So we didn't have these figures because these were not our concerns. Our concern was with how many activities would take place, what repercussions this would have, what alliances would emerge from the forum. This was always our response, we never just said we don't have [the information you want]. We always said, 'we don't have that, but we have this', trying to foster other agendas (Kélem Cabral, interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

Additionally, when asked by journalists to pinpoint activities of particular importance, the team attempted to provide what they considered a representative selection of the groups present at the forum. As the interview extract quoted below indicates, this meant

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<sup>59</sup> Melina Marcelino was one of the interns working for the Belém communication team.

having to navigate the complex terrain of trying to stay within the boundaries delineated by the Charter of Principles:

K: If [the press] asked us 'look, what is going to [happen today] that is of most importance?' we always tried to highlight various events by various sectors. I never said there is only Leonardo Boff, [...] we always tried to highlight... principally, the programme of the tents.<sup>60</sup>

[...]

H: And why did you choose the tents?

K: Because the tents encompassed various groups [...]. They ended up serving as a reference point for various sectors. And as the tents were divulged in the general programme, which was, in a sense, a general programme of the forum itself, not exclusively of one organisation, they were collective. So within the Charter of Principles it was possible. But always with preference for the Pan-Amazon tent [...], for the discussions of the black people, the indigenous, and the collective rights of peoples. Because when the forum was chosen to come to the Amazon, there was a political position that these peoples would have prominence in the forum. So, following this political orientation of giving voice to these movements that historically were always violated, always had less space. So we gave them a greater emphasis.

H: So you thought that within the Charter of Principles this was still possible?

K: Yes, because it's as if it were a form of politics of compensation.

(Interview with Kélem Cabral, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese)

This concern to give preferential treatment to historically marginalised groups draws attention to the inadequacies of a completely 'laissez faire' interpretation of the concept of open space. In a nutshell, if Forum organisers do nothing to promote particular issues or actors for fear of being exclusionary, mass media will define the agenda according to their own criteria, and groups that have traditionally been excluded are highly likely to remain so. While the Belém communication team were clearly aware of this and tried to counteract it, their attempts to draw attention to the struggles of traditionally marginalised groups were implemented in an ad hoc rather than systematic manner. Without a shared media strategy to work from, decisions about how to respond to media requests were mostly left to the judgement of individual members of the team, who had little previous experience of social forums and whose

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<sup>60</sup> At each WSF there are usually a number of tents, organised according to themes, which function as gathering points for broad movement sectors.

understanding of their role was inevitably influenced by their professional experience in conventional media.

The case of the Belém forum illustrates some of the practical consequences of the organisational and political complexities of the WSF; in particular, the difficulties of implementing a properly *international* media strategy when the WSF as a whole does not have a shared vision for how (or whether) to engage with mainstream media. First, it proved difficult to mobilise an international network of representatives from organisations within the WSF who could promote the Belém forum to mainstream media in their respective countries. Second, the separation and lack of dialogue between the Communication Commission and the local communication team not only hindered efforts to inform the international media about the forum, it also complicated the work of dealing with local media, as the Belém communication team had few sources of guidance. Combined with operational constraints and the local media's framing of the forum, this meant that it was very difficult for the Belém team to take a proactive approach to influencing the local media agenda. Consequently, the local media coverage of the WSF, which framed the forum as a tourist event or government-sponsored global conference 'coming to town', is unlikely to have generated a sense among the local population of being part of a global WSF public.

### ***Conclusion***

The lesson to be drawn from the analysis presented in this chapter seems to be that *if* the WSF is to engage with mass media (I emphasise 'if' because this is far from a consensual objective) it needs to develop a clear strategy for doing so. At a minimum, this would entail defining clear lines of responsibility and dedicating adequate personnel and resources to communication. Beyond that, however, the WSF would also need to develop more of a shared political vision regarding the nature, scope, and purpose of its

relations with mass media. The international approach that is needed in order to engage effectively with international media systems requires coordinated efforts to promote the WSF in different local and national contexts and close collaboration and information sharing among the different instances of the WSF.

Should the WSF succeed in implementing a more coherent strategy for dealing with mass media, it might be able to make some inroads, and, of course, it has achieved favourable media coverage on a number of occasions. There are, however, good reasons to be cautious about the extent to which the WSF will be able to make a significant impact within mediated publics constituted by mass media. This is not least because of the national (or subnational) orientation of such publics. As we saw in the case of the Belém WSF, local news media tend to 'proximate' global issues and events to what they perceive as the concerns of their publics, and this means that such issues and events are often framed in ways that distort and trivialise them (cf. Leung, 2009). While it is beyond the scope of this study to analyse international media coverage of the WSF, similar dynamics are likely to have impacted on the framing of the Forum by mass media operating at local and national scales in other parts of the world. Another obstacle is the non-dialogic character of such media: even if oppositional actors are given coverage, they are rarely allowed to speak for themselves on their own terms. While this is a problem for social movements in all parts of the world, the Northern bias of international news agencies works to the systematic disadvantage of actors from the global South. The development of thick forms of solidarity requires dialogue and in-depth analysis, and such dialogue and analysis is unlikely to be facilitated by mass media (cf. Nash, 2009: 158).

In brief, mass media coverage is by itself unlikely to generate a sense of identification with a global WSF public or facilitate translation and knowledge production among WSF participants. If the WSF is to succeed in enabling the construction of public spheres that

facilitate genuine dialogue and analysis, it seems that other forms of communication are necessary. In the chapters that follow, I explore various other initiatives that in different ways seek to enable WSF participants to communicate on their own terms.

## 4. Making the WSF public: promises and contradictions of openness

*The whole World Social Forum process has to do with the strengthening of civil society, strengthening our capacity of facing, resisting, and building alternatives to capitalism, or to neoliberalism if you want. And the question is, knowing that being fragmented it's quite difficult, how to connect without the pretension of having a central body that could tell everybody what to do. So in a democratic process and a very participatory process, how to connect all this diversity, all these differences, all these different perspectives to look to the same question, that is, facing capitalism... (Moema Miranda, interview, January 2009).<sup>61</sup>*

*The Forum site, it's not interactive, it's static – it's as if it were a TV. Well, ok – it's a little bit interactive. But it could be more so. Because, ok, you want to post a text on the Forum site, how do you do it? Ah, you have to send an email to someone responsible for the communication of the Forum, and if it so happens that this person thinks it's interesting, they will [post it]. Or, if not, if you are part of an entity that is part of the Forum committee, that helps, then the entity will publish the text. Or if you are very well known, that helps. But there is no mechanism for having an interactive space, where people can publish texts, photos, videos about the Forum (Everton Rodrigues, interview, January 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>62</sup>*

As discussed in Chapter 1, the WSF might be conceived as a space of epistemic plurality, which brings together a wide array of movements with different political imaginaries, organisational cultures, and experiences. As an epistemic project, the WSF seeks not only to affirm the existence and validity of their multiple knowledges but also to facilitate convergence between them. A fundamental question is how this might be achieved without exclusion and incorporation, and – as

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<sup>61</sup> Moema Miranda represents IBASE, one of the eight Brazilian organisations that founded the WSF, on the IC and is a member of the Liaison Group.

<sup>62</sup> Everton Rodrigues is a Brazilian FLOSS activist based in Porto Alegre. He has been involved since the beginning of the WSF in organising activities relating to free software and culture, including the Free Knowledge Laboratory at the WSF 2005.

Moema Miranda highlights in the interview extract quoted above – without a central coordinating body. The WSF needs, on the one hand, to provide mechanisms that enable participants to develop shared visions and proposals while, on the other, remaining open to marginal or divergent perspectives. As outlined in Chapter 1, however, the WSF has been criticised for falling short on both counts. Within what has become known as the ‘space versus movement’ debate, critics of the open space format have focused on its failure to facilitate the construction of consensus around shared positions and collective political action. Another strand of criticism, meanwhile, has focused on the WSF’s failure to live up to its own ideals of openness. Focusing on its various exclusions, its opacity, and its failure to engage with a wider public beyond the ‘already converted’, such criticisms have revolved around the argument that the WSF is not *open enough* and that this needs to be ameliorated.

This chapter explores various initiatives that seek to address the shortcomings highlighted by these critiques. These include projects aimed at providing tools for WSF participants to document their ideas and proposals and make these publicly available, and a website that provides online ‘spaces’ where WSF participants can engage in debate, produce collaborative documents, and publicise their activities between forum events. What these initiatives have in common is that they seek to expand the WSF beyond the time-space of particular social forum events. In other words, they might be conceived as efforts to make the WSF public. Although the proponents of these projects do not necessarily use the language of publics, their concerns to make the WSF more inclusive and give it continuity over time through the creation and circulation of documentation can be conceived in such terms. As discussed in Chapter 1, publics are not best understood as bounded spaces of physical contiguity, but as constituted through the circulation of discourse. That is, publics are extended in space and time through the circulation of texts (Barnett, 2003; Warner, 2002). Importantly,

the initiatives described in this chapter might be understood as attempts to constitute the WSF as a *global* public, in the sense that by documenting the ideas, proposals, and activities of forum participants and making these available online, they seek to make the WSF open, in principle, to anyone anywhere in the world.

In what follows, I begin by outlining some of the initiatives that forum organisers and communication activists have tried to implement, and show how these can be understood as efforts to make the WSF public. I then consider how publicness might be conceived as a solution to the challenge of facilitating genuinely 'bottom-up' processes of convergence. Because they seek to enable WSF participants to document their own ideas and proposals, without any central direction, these initiatives can be seen as a way to stimulate autonomous knowledge production and affirm epistemic plurality. At the same time, because they make it possible for WSF participants to identify others working in similar areas, they have the potential to facilitate convergence. In brief, self-organised documentation can be described as a form of 'knowledge management' intended to counteract the fragmentation that otherwise might result from the open space format, while adhering to its key principle of respect for diversity.

Next, I look at how these initiatives are conceived by many of their proponents as a means to fulfil the WSF's promise of openness and – by extension – its promise of globality. I show how their commitment to making the WSF 'truly' open is informed by ideals of horizontality, transparency, and free circulation of information that reflect a broader ethos of openness within contemporary social movements (Juris, 2008a; King, 2004; Nunes, 2005c). These initiatives are motivated by a concern to ensure accountability and inclusion, which resonates strongly with the normative dimensions of the classic concept of the public sphere, but are also conceived as a way to prevent the hegemonic closure normally associated with consensus formation. Making the WSF 'truly open' in this way also can

be seen as a way to make it ‘truly global’, in the sense of making it open to the infinite possibilities that exist in the world.

Having considered the promises of what I call the open space approach to documentation (which is essentially premised on the idea of providing tools for WSF participants to do their own documentation in a self-organised manner), I then discuss some of its limitations, focusing on two key aspects: exclusion and fragmentation. Despite good intentions, none of the initiatives described in this chapter have been very successful, and I suggest this is at least partly the result of contradictions in the particular ways in which the open space concept has been interpreted. Although they are in principle open to all, relatively few WSF participants have utilised the tools made available to document their activities, raising questions about their *de facto* inclusiveness. Moreover, the initiatives suffer from a tendency towards fragmentation and disorganisation, ironically replicating the dispersion they were partly intended to counteract. I conclude by suggesting that a more proactive approach is needed in order to make the WSF really open and inclusive.

### ***Live memory and virtual open spaces: extending the WSF in time and space***

The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body. No-one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants [...].

Nonetheless, organizations or groups of organizations that participate in the Forums meetings must be assured the right, during such meetings, to deliberate on declarations or actions they may decide on, whether singly or in coordination with other participants. *The World Social Forum undertakes to circulate such decisions widely by the means at its disposal, without directing, hierarchizing, censoring or restricting them, but as deliberations of the organizations or groups of organizations that made the decisions* (World Social Forum, 2001b: Articles 6 and 7, emphasis added).

Over the course of its decade-long existence, there has been a number of projects which have aimed to make the WSF public by

documenting and giving visibility – in a ‘non-directive’ manner – to the ideas and proposals developed by participants, as article 7 of the Charter of Principles suggests is forum organisers’ responsibility. ‘Documenting the WSF’ can of course refer to a range of initiatives, including physical collections of material relating to the WSF,<sup>63</sup> websites that function as repositories for alternative media coverage,<sup>64</sup> archives of material relating to organisational aspects of the WSF process,<sup>65</sup> and, undoubtedly, a myriad of other projects organised by different actors for different purposes. It is not within the scope of this chapter – nor, in all likelihood, possible – to provide a comprehensive overview of such projects. What I focus on is what might be described as ‘official’ initiatives: that is, efforts by forum organisers and members of the Communication Commission, acting ‘on behalf of’ the WSF, to make tools available for WSF participants to document their own activities and proposals.<sup>66</sup>

Such initiatives are referred to variously as ‘memory’, ‘outcomes’, and ‘documentation’ projects by their proponents, depending on their specific aims. Here I use ‘documentation’ as a

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<sup>63</sup> Professional librarians connected to the WSF Library Project have collected physical documents at various social forum events, including the WSF 2007 in Nairobi, the United States Social Forum (USSF) 2007, the ESF 2008 and the WSF 2011 in Dakar. They have also created a website (<http://wsflibrary.org>) containing documentation of activities that have taken place at social forums.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, [www.ciranda.net](http://www.ciranda.net) and [www.wsftv.net](http://www.wsftv.net). Alternative media coverage of the WSF process is the subject of Chapter 5.

<sup>65</sup> The main WSF website ([www.forumsocialmundial.org.br](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br)) contains a wealth of documentation of this kind, including reports from meetings, statistics, details of registered organisations and programmed activities, information bulletins, plans and proposals from working groups, etc. See, in particular, the ‘Memorial’ and ‘Library of Alternatives’ sections of the site.

<sup>66</sup> In terms of who organises these projects, it is important to note that it is difficult to draw a clear-cut distinction between ‘forum organisers’ and ‘forum participants’, as people involved in the WSF process wear different hats at different times. Another important point to make is that any projects carried out ‘by’ the Forum, though generally sanctioned by the IC or the organising committee for any given forum event, do not always have clearly defined lines of responsibility and are not necessarily high on everyone’s agenda. Such projects are often initiated and implemented by enthusiastic individuals involved in IC Commissions or working groups, who have a particular interest in documentation and communication. It is also important to note that this chapter does not provide a complete overview of all the ‘official’ documentation projects that have been organised at different forum events, but focuses on key initiatives that offer analytical purchase on the questions explored in this thesis.

generic term intended to encompass a broad range of practices concerned with creating and preserving a record of the ideas and practices of social forum participants and making this publicly available. Importantly, the proponents of these projects are not simply concerned to create an historical archive for posterity, but emphasise the importance of what some refer to as 'live memory': information that can strengthen the WSF process in the present by facilitating collective reflection and helping participants connect with each other across distance and between forum events. In other words, they seek to constitute the WSF as a public sphere that enables knowledge production and convergence. Insofar as it helps WSF participants elaborate their own discourses and knowledges, this might be seen as a way to strengthen the WSF's counterpublic capacity. However, as I will show, these projects are also motivated by a strong concern to include 'outsiders'. Underpinned by a conception of publicness associated with ideals of openness, transparency, and 'unmediated' communication, the initiatives described here are perhaps better understood as efforts to extend on a global scale the kind of general public sphere that is prefigured by the WSF.

Documenting the WSF is a task that has become increasingly complicated as it has grown in size and complexity. While the first editions of the WSF included a number of centrally organised conference-style plenaries, self-organised activities have increasingly been prioritised. Combined with the growing number of participants, this emphasis on self-organisation has led to increasing complexity and, arguably, fragmentation. Whereas during the first editions of the WSF it was possible for organisers to record systematically the main debates and proposals,<sup>67</sup> the increasing number and prominence of self-organised activities has made it virtually impossible for any one

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<sup>67</sup> The main WSF website contains syntheses and reports from the main conferences and seminars of the first, second and third forums, collected by the Brazilian Secretariat. See the 'Memorial' section of the WSF website at [www.forumsocialmundial.org.br](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br) (last accessed 24 September 2011).

group to cover them all (cf. J. Smith, Juris et al., 2008). At the same time, the increasing size and complexity of the Forum has made documentation more important in order to help people find information about groups and activities they are interested in. The challenge has been to devise methods for documentation that are able to capture and represent accurately the plurality of activities taking place at social forums in an easily accessible manner.

One way in which organisers have tried to do this is through the so-called 'Mural of Proposals', which was first implemented at the WSF 2003. Coordinators of self-organised activities were invited to bring the results of their discussions to the main hall of the university campus where the WSF was held, where they were exhibited on a large panel. Participants could also submit proposals after the forum had ended. These were all gathered by forum organisers and published on the WSF website, which contains 157 proposals from self-organised activities (World Social Forum, 2003a). Chico Whitaker explained the rationale behind this initiative in the following terms:

We wanted to make the proposals coming out of the Forum more visible, because a lot of people asked 'so what? There were discussions, but what came out of them?' Moreover, the Forum was proposed as an event to think about alternatives, because it is no use to struggle against the system, simply pressuring the system, saying 'no' to it. The anti-globalisation movement said 'no, we don't want the World Bank the way it is, we don't want capitalism, we don't want this'. And we had to have a movement saying 'Yes, we want this, this and this' [...]. The Forum exists for this – it's just that it didn't appear at the Forum. Workshops and the seminars were held, and nobody got the results. A lot of stuff appeared on the internet, but without order, without anything. So we thought, in 2003, about making a mural of proposals for action, and invited all the workshops to bring [...] the results of their discussions and their proposals (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

A similar mural of proposals was organised at the WSF 2005, as part of a project called *Memória Viva* [Live Memory] that was funded by a surplus from the ESF 2003 in Paris.<sup>68</sup> According to organisers, 356

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<sup>68</sup> The ESF 2003 was the occasion for the foundation of the 'ESF Memory Project' by a

proposals were collected in total, and these were later published on a dedicated website (Chico Whitaker, interview, February 2009).<sup>69</sup> Since 2005, similar attempts to document proposals and declarations have been made at a number of other social forums, including the three sites of the polycentric WSF in 2006 and the WSF 2007 in Nairobi. At the ESF 2008 in Malmö there was an 'Outcomes Project' which aimed to document the results of the discussions that took place during the event. At the WSF 2009 in Belém there was a 'Convergence Square' (*Praça de Convergências*) where participants could display their own proposals and study proposals made by others.

What these documentation initiatives have in common is that they take as a starting point the debates that take place and the decisions that are made during the physical gatherings of the WSF and then seek to make these public beyond the particular time-space of the events themselves. Whitaker describes the online publication of proposals in the following terms:

The diffusion of this information through the internet – indicating how to contact the authors of the proposals – opens new perspectives through new contacts and relationships now made possible, allowing new expressions around the proposals during the Forum. *It is as if the Forum's square had become permanently open, outliving time and space, lasting longer than the limited five-day event of Porto Alegre* (2008: 85, emphasis added).

Though he does not use the language of publics, Whitaker's portrayal of the documentation projects as means to enable the Forum's 'square' to outlive time and space can easily be conceived in such terms. Importantly, while spatial metaphors are prominent, the notion of the square extended in space *and* time also draws attention to the

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group of European activists and intellectuals. This was active for about three years and incorporated a number of initiatives including a database of reports collected from organisers of workshops and seminars during the ESF 2003, the now defunct 'E-library on and for Social Transformation', an online collection of articles by activist-intellectuals, and the 'WSF process' website ([www.wsfprocess.net](http://www.wsfprocess.net)) which was developed as a database of organisations, activities and proposals for the WSF 2007 in Nairobi. Activists involved in the ESF Memory Project have also played a central role in efforts to organise documentation projects for the WSF.

<sup>69</sup> The site is no longer operational as it ceased to be maintained after funding for the project ran out.

temporal character of publics highlighted in Chapter 1, and the fact that it is documentation – the creation and circulation of *texts* – that gives publics their continuity over time (cf. Barnett, 2003). The documentation of discussions and proposals might therefore be seen both as a means to extend the WSF public beyond the spatial confines of any particular forum event – thereby making it ‘truly’ global – and as a way to give it continuity as a process.

A more recent initiative, the OpenFSM website (<http://openfsm.net>) might be said to represent an extension of this logic (though it was implemented by a largely different group of actors from the organisers of the first Porto Alegre forums).<sup>70</sup> Set up in March 2008, OpenFSM is ‘a platform for social activism provided by the World Social Forum’ (*About OpenFSM*, n.d.), which can be used by any group or organisation that subscribes to the Charter of Principles. Presented by its facilitators as ‘an open virtual social forum territory’ (*OpenFSM Info*, 2010), it might be understood as an effort to create, quite literally, an online extension of the physical site of a WSF event. It operates on the basis of ‘spaces’: separate sections of the site which are managed by particular groups. Each space exists in an autonomous relationship to the rest of the site, and anyone can start a new space for whatever purpose they like (within the parameters of the Charter of Principles). Each space provides a set of collaborative tools, including a blog, wiki pages, and email lists.

OpenFSM thus provides online spaces, which its facilitators present as analogous to the classrooms, tents, and lecture halls provided for seminars and workshops at forum events (*OpenFSM Info*, 2010), where activists can engage in discussion and create collaborative documents. It also offers a means for groups to post

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<sup>70</sup> OpenFSM uses OpenCore, a software platform developed by The Open Planning Project (now OpenPlans), a New York-based non-profit technology organisation. The platform was originally developed as an organising tool for small and informal community groups working on urban planning issues. It was adapted by Dimitris Moraitis, a Greek Indymedia activist, to create OpenESF.net for the ESF process, who subsequently in liaison with Pierre George of the Communication Commission proposed to the IC that a similar site should be created for the WSF.

information about their ideas and activities and in this way make them public beyond the group itself. Each OpenFSM space might, then, function simultaneously as a collaborative space for internal debate and work-in-progress *and* as a platform from which to connect with other groups. The site is thus conceived as replicating the physical architecture of social forums online; providing a virtual 'space of spaces' in which WSF participants can continue their discussions between social forum events and explore the spaces created by other groups. In this way, OpenFSM is intended to facilitate both continuity and convergence. As the Greek Indymedia activist who developed the site explains, helping to preserve collective memory and give continuity to the WSF process was an explicit aim of OpenFSM:

Initially these web tools started from the European Social Forum, from the Memory Project, which central goal was to maintain the memory of what's going on during the forums. The goal for OpenFSM and OpenESF is also more to give people tools to organise themselves and work together even between the events and maintain some ongoing dynamic... and provide updates for people after they get back to their homes and... yes, provide some continuity to the social forum process (Dimitris Moraitis, interview, January 2009).

As with the documentation projects described above, spatial metaphors are prominent, but the creation of written records is what enables continuity. Despite their differences, all the initiatives outlined above are informed by ideals associated with the notion of open space. Importantly, they are based on the principle of making tools available for WSF participants to document and publicise their own ideas and practices in an autonomous and self-organised manner, rather than attempting to do this in a centralised fashion. They also have in common that they have not quite achieved their intended objectives. I will come back to the difficulties associated with the projects later in the chapter; first, I examine the principles behind the open space approach to documentation in more detail.

## ***Self-organised documentation: autonomy, plurality, and convergence***

J: We don't document anything, we offer services so that other people are able to do it, and we have to do this both because it is easier for us, but also because it is political, because if we as the organising committee were to go in and start documenting we would be forced to choose. Shall we follow the large popular movements, or these movements, or these movements? It becomes political. So instead we offer, 'here is an archive where you can upload stuff', 'here you can organise agenda points and report', 'here we have outcomes and proposals' and so on, 'here you can report them'. We offer an index on our pages where we can show everybody that this was produced, but we don't produce in that way [...]. We offer services instead of doing things directly.

H: So it's in a way a political decision?

J: Partly a political thing, because the organising committee isn't supposed to direct the contents of the forum. The idea is that the forum is created by those who come here, and there is a similar line of thought when it comes to documentation.

(Interview with Jonas Danielsson, September 2008, my translation from Swedish)<sup>71</sup>

Part of the motivation for having WSF participants document their own activities comes from a commitment to 'giving voice' and letting participants speak for themselves on their own terms, without having their ideas and practices interpreted and re-presented by third parties. There is a widely shared sentiment within the WSF that no-one can speak for another, and providing tools for coordinators of self-organised activities to write their own reports might be understood as a way to facilitate more 'unfiltered' communication, which respects participants' own intentions and avoids imposing interpretations from the outside.

Pierre George, who has been one of the main proponents of this approach, envisages a system in which everybody produces analyses of their own practice, which can then be consulted by others. This would not only be a mechanism for making visible ideas and proposals, but also a way to stimulate reflexive practice and collaborative knowledge production among participants:

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<sup>71</sup> Jonas Danielsson was the coordinator of the Documentation Working Group of the ESF 2008.

As Forum I would promote this protocol of having the activity organisers make... stimulate them to make reports, value what they did, have a repository where these things are consultable by anyone. So this is kind of the [WSF] process producing its own contents in an accountable way. And of course when doing this people will negotiate the report, there are several organisations [involved in each activity]. It also deepens the process (Pierre George, interview, February 2009).<sup>72</sup>

The open space approach to documentation, then, might be understood as a method for stimulating the production of knowledge by and for grassroots social movement activists, in the sense that the requirement to produce a report prompts collective reflection and dialogue. Documentation can also provide much-needed continuity to movement dynamics, helping activists to build on previous experience. Providing tools for documentation and encouraging WSF participants to make use of these thus might contribute to stimulating autonomous processes of knowledge production. This might include organisational knowledge, substantive knowledge on particular issues, and the broader vision of a group.

Importantly, the open space approach might also be understood as *validating* this knowledge, in that it privileges first-hand accounts by participants over third-party interpretations by, for example, forum organisers, journalists, or researchers. Developing this reading further, the open space approach might be seen as inspired by a commitment to the epistemic diversity that exist within the WSF, as the following reflection on the task of creating an historical record of the Forum suggests:

It's important [that the history of the Forum is told by those who made it] because [...] [the WSF] is a self-organised, plural, diverse, multi-partisan space, so you have no way of telling this story from one location, with a single vision. Because this is not what is written in the Charter of Principles. So none of us feels able to sit down and say 'the history of the World Social Forum is this'. Because it is one thing from my point of view, another from your point of view, in your experience [...]. It is different in the experience of each and

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<sup>72</sup> Pierre George represents Caritas France on the IC and is a member of the Communication Commission.

every one who comes [...]. To tell this story by who made it and who constructed it is fundamental. If not we will have a record of a *pensamento único*, which is precisely what the Forum doesn't want (Salette Valesan Camba, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>73</sup>

More than just making epistemic plurality visible, though, such projects are also conceived as a means to facilitate convergence. Annette Nilsson, a Swedish activist who was involved in Outcomes Project of the ESF 2008 and later worked to organise the Convergence Square in Belém, conceptualised how this might happen in the following terms:

If you actually would have maybe 500 results organised by the different axes, you could actually as a participant or a participating organisation [...] go to that internet page or to that physical place to look at the maybe 50 or 30 results in your axis, to see 'ok, this is what has been done during the Forum, and maybe there are two or three that are doing the same thing that I am doing', and then maybe you can actually have a convergence and a merging process between different countries, or even within the same country, people not knowing that the other is doing the same thing (interview, February 2009).

Within this schema, the answer to how, 'in a democratic process and a very participatory process [...] to connect all this diversity' (as Moema Miranda asks in the interview extract quoted at the beginning of this chapter) lies primarily in *visibility*: making the ideas, initiatives, and proposals of WSF participants public and thereby enabling those actors to identify others working in similar areas.

The idea that convergence can be facilitated by *organising* information about the initiatives and proposals of participants relates to a broader concern within the WSF with what is sometimes referred to as 'systematisation' (Giordano Delgado & Romano, 2005). In addition to the projects described here, this has involved mechanisms to facilitate merging (or 'agglutination' as it is commonly known in WSF parlance) between self-organised activities proposed by

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<sup>73</sup> At the time of this interview, Salette Valesan Camba worked for the Paulo Freire Institute in São Paulo. She has been closely involved in the work of the Communication Commission and currently represents Ciranda on the Liaison Group.

participants.<sup>74</sup> Though the term rarely is used, what such efforts make evident is a concern with ‘knowledge management’. As shown in Chapter 1, this is an issue that has become increasingly salient for social movements with the emergence of new communication technologies. Although the internet might enable transparency and plurality to an unprecedented degree, it also has been accompanied by problems of fragmentation and information overload, which might impede rather than facilitate critical analysis and knowledge production. For proponents of the projects described here, ‘knowledge management’ in the form of self-organised documentation is a mechanism that can counteract the fragmentation that might otherwise result from the open space model, while respecting the principles of autonomy and diversity. In other words, making the WSF public, in a systematic manner, is seen as key to enabling the bottom-up process of convergence that is at the heart of its project.

***‘That is the WSF, this is the open WSF’: transparency, inclusion, emergence***

The small initiatives somehow have to be part of the process, have to be part with the same voice, with the same space, not physical space but has to be considered part of the process, [as much] as the big ones (Brazilian activist, interview, 2009).

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the WSF has been criticised on a number of grounds for failing to live up to its own ideal of openness. According to these criticisms, the problem is not so much

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<sup>74</sup> Before the ESF 2008, for example, around 800 proposed seminars and workshops were reduced to around 200 in the final programme through a process of compulsory merging, in which the coordinators of proposed activities were obliged to search (using a database) for others who had proposed similar activities and organise joint sessions. An attempt to facilitate a similar merging process was also made by organisers of the Belém WSF, but in a less directive manner (by encouraging rather than making merging obligatory) which was ultimately not very successful.

the inability of the WSF to facilitate consensus formation as the fact that it is not *open enough*. These ideas can be situated within the broader ethos of openness among contemporary social movements that was discussed in Chapter 1, according to which free circulation of information is integral to the practice of horizontal, networked forms of politics.

One way in which the ethos of openness manifests itself in the context of the WSF is in demands for more transparency around decision-making procedures. As outlined in Chapter 1, the WSF has been criticised widely for its informal hierarchies and organisational opacity. Expressing frustrations shared by many activists on the ground, one person involved in the preparations for the WSF 2009 couched the issue of openness in the following terms, referring to discussions taking place among IC members:

The methodology was not discussed on the mailing list, it was discussed in specific meetings with specific people, with specific movements, in a specific logic that I am not here to judge or give opinions about, but it is not the logic that I thought first, that it was a public [...] discussion. Because the World Social Forum is a horizontal and open space, so in my mind the most horizontal and open space is a mailing list open to everyone. But then you see people exchanging much more in private emails, or in small groups of private emails than in the public lists. This to me...is [an indication] that the process, the public process, the global process doesn't exist, it's private articulations (interview, 2009).

Here the ideal of openness is linked explicitly to the notion of publicness. Transparency around decision-making procedures – that is, making discussions about organisational issues *public* – is conceived as a requirement for the WSF to fulfil the promise of open space. The ethos of openness is clearly discernible here – the aim of publicness is not only to inform ‘rank-and-file’ activists about the discussions that take place, but also to enable them to participate in such discussions, should they wish to.<sup>75</sup> What is also interesting about

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<sup>75</sup>This commitment to organisational transparency is widely shared among WSF communication activists. Members of the Communication Commission, for example,

this analysis is the link that is made between openness and globality; that is, the suggestion that without such discussions taking place in *public*, on mailing lists that are in principle open to anyone anywhere in the world, the WSF cannot claim to be *global*. The implication is that without discussions about methodology, strategy, and other organisational issues being open to anyone who has an interest in the outcome, the WSF is not the global public sphere that some commentators have suggested it is.

Publicness, then, is in important ways about *inclusion* – about making it possible for anyone who wishes to participate in the WSF public to do so. Pierre George conceptualises the purpose of documenting the debates and activities that take place during social forums explicitly in such terms:

H: What's the kind of objective or purpose of having these reports?

P: Because this, I mean, this is a concentrate of the dialogues, so this is exportable, this is lasting in time, so it's elements that people coming on in the process can grab to accelerate their integration in this process.

H: Uhum, to kind of to see what has already happened and...

P: Yes, and also this is such a huge process, you cannot grab all of it, you cannot go everywhere you want to go. So if you want to be informed, get into [it] at some point, [if] you have a new concern, you have a newcomer, they can find elements to prepare for dialogue (interview, February 2009).

This draws attention to a key issue. For many of the proponents of the projects discussed here, openness is not only about availability of information – it is also about having access to means of communication and being able to participate actively. The architects behind the OpenFSM website conceive of the site's function very much in these terms. Ethan Jucovy, a programmer and FLOSS activist who worked for The Open Planning Project (the company that created the software that OpenFSM is based on), explains his understanding of the rationale behind the site in the following terms:

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make a point of conducting their discussions on a publicly accessible mailing list, making their budgets, work plans, and other documentation available online using OpenFSM, and conducting regular Skype chats that are open to anyone who is interested in participating – transcripts of which usually are made available online afterwards.

I think the first order goal of it is to just create this space where anyone can just get things done without having to go through the... whether or not there is supposed to be a hierarchical process and a hierarchical organisation of the WSF there obviously is, and you know even on the websites, the official websites of the WSF, people can't put their content, people can't list events without going through the organisation itself, so I think [the creators of OpenFSM] wanted to create this space primarily so that anyone can just create an ad hoc group, create a session and advertise it without having to worry about going through the official channels. So this is like, you know, that is the World Social Forum, this is the *open* World Social Forum, where anyone can just do whatever they want... (interview, February 2009).

Again, evident here is a conception that the WSF needs to fulfil its *promise* of openness and that free circulation of information is fundamental to this. This is not only about transparency in the sense of top-down dissemination by Forum organisers to give grassroots activists access to information about decision-making processes, but – more importantly – about enabling active participation through the ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells, 2009) that the internet makes possible. This, in important ways, resonates strongly with the normative dimension of the concept of publics. As Kelty (2008: 3) points out, a ‘legitimate public sphere is one that gives outsiders a way in: they may or may not be heard, but they do not have to appeal to any authority (inside or outside the organization) in order to have a voice’. The criticism that Jucovy directs against the official websites of the Forum (which echoes that made by Everton Rodrigues in the interview extract quoted at the beginning of this chapter) emphasises the failure of the WSF to meet the normative criteria associated with the concept of the public sphere. If the WSF does not provide mechanisms for ‘regular’ activists to post their own content and participate directly in discussions, it is by definition not a public (in the sense of a dialogic sphere that is in principle open to everyone). As a site that makes this possible, OpenFSM is conceived by its creators as a way to make the WSF ‘really’ public and thus fulfil its promise of openness.

The ideal of openness to outsiders also manifests itself in a commitment among proponents of these initiatives to preventing the exclusion of 'marginal' actors and knowledges. Instructive in this respect are the criticisms that some have directed against the assemblies that normally are held at the end of each WSF. Introduced in 2007, these were prompted by concerns that the Forum needed to take a more proactive approach to facilitating broad convergence around key issues.<sup>76</sup> Whereas at the WSF 2007 these were organised centrally and defined on the basis of the thematic axes of the Forum, it was decided that at the Belém WSF such assemblies would be self-organised – proposed and coordinated by participating organisations themselves – and complemented by an Assembly of Assemblies on the final day during which declarations from the various assemblies would be read out. The same format was adopted for the WSF 2011, where a total of 38 assemblies were held over the two final days. Such assemblies usually are organised by a number of large organisations or networks which tend already to be working together and know one another, and are oriented towards the production of a joint declaration or statement.

This model is perceived as potentially exclusionary by some of the advocates of the projects described in this chapter. One activist explained her reservations in the following terms:

It seems like most of the big assemblies or the successful assemblies were organised by big organisations and big networks that have been in the process for many years [...] so that makes it easier for those who have experience, who have created networks already [...]. That gives more visibility to the big organisations and the big networks, the things that are already in place [...]. And then if you are small, you belong to a small organisation and maybe you have a different point of view even, it can be hard to be part of one of the assemblies (Annette Nilsson, interview, February 2009).

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<sup>76</sup> This traditionally has been the function of the Assembly of Social Movements organised by many of the larger movements and networks within the WSF. A regular feature of social forums since the first WSF, this usually is held on the last day of the forum and issues declarations putting forward common positions and calls for mobilisation. It has attracted criticism from proponents of the open space concept for issuing what might appear as the 'final document' of the Forum and drawing attention away from smaller initiatives (e.g. Whitaker, 2008b).

In contrast to this model, the documentation projects and OpenFSM offer visibility and a way in also for newcomers and smaller groups.

A related criticism against the assembly model focuses on the reductive effects of the aim of generating short syntheses that everyone can agree on. Ethan Jucovy explained this problem in the following terms:

I think it's very interesting that there's this [...] whole elaborate process, where you've got your workshops and your sessions, and then you have your assemblies that synthesise those, and then you have the Assembly of the Assemblies that synthesises that, and presumably, I mean I don't know how this came about but I assume that this is intended to work around these problems of representation and who gets to say what and where it goes, but it seems like the end result is both extremely hierarchical and not open at all, because [...] the people who are organising this are going to be filtering in and out what goes onto that top level thing, and also in that process of capturing so little of the information in as short a format as possible, you get no information, so those ten lines<sup>77</sup> they don't say anything about what [...] has been accomplished at the forum... (interview, February 2009).

Following up on Jucovy's analysis, his colleague Jacqueline Arasi, who I interviewed at the same time, added:

There are no formal mechanisms right now to capture the great diversity of representation and achievement that happened here [in Belém], because everything is pushed through the sieve of consensus which strips away the most interesting parts of what happened, it's just something that's so neutral that as Ethan says it's contentless (interview, February 2009).<sup>78</sup>

These complaints resonate strongly with the critique that has been directed against the exclusionary and homogenising effects of consensus formation, which, as discussed in Chapter 1, is at the heart of the deliberative model of the public sphere. Arasi's objection to the 'sieve of consensus' that strips away the richness and diversity of the WSF closely resembles criticisms of the way in which supposedly

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<sup>77</sup> Assembly organisers were asked to produce a document of no more than 3000 characters outlining their conclusions, and in turn synthesise this into a summary of no more than ten lines.

<sup>78</sup> Jacqueline Arasi was the person at The Open Planning Project who came up with the concept for the open core platform.

'general' public spheres incorporate or marginalise divergent perspectives. In other words, the ideal of openness that is at work here makes explicit the point at which the notion of open space diverges from the classic concept of the public sphere. As noted in Chapter 1, while there are significant overlaps, the idea of open space exceeds the conceptual limits of the deliberative concept of publics by challenging the ideal of consensus. Though the assemblies are carefully presented by Forum organisers as autonomous initiatives which in no way represent the WSF as a whole, it is nonetheless the exclusionary logic of consensus formation that is being pinpointed here and to which initiatives like OpenFSM are conceived as a counterpoint.

At the heart of these criticisms of the assembly model is a desire to capture the richness of the WSF and avoid hegemonic closure, understood not only in terms of the exclusion of already-existing actors and knowledges, but also in the sense of being closed off to what is presently only emergent. As noted in Chapter 1, the notion of emergence has been conceived as central to the open space concept (Sen, 2010: 1000). Openness, thus conceived, signifies openness to the immanent potential of the future,<sup>79</sup> as well as to the infinite complexity of the world. Jucovy's and Arasi's comments above testify to a frustration with the closing off to the diversity and richness of the Forum which they perceive as resulting from the assembly process.

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<sup>79</sup> Santos (2004) has made this point in relation to the significance of the WSF's slogan that 'another world is possible' (cited in Sen, 2010).

## *Limitations of open space*

To have [all these different movements] gathered in one place and be able to exchange experiences and everything is a really big thing, at the same time it is really important that you are careful about not favouring one organisation, letting one organisation take over, in order to be able to have this conversation on equal terms [...]. Of course, these are radical organisations and social movements that are conscious of the structures in society, and those structures remain, we have organisations from the West, from the Nordic countries and so on that are strong, that have quite a lot of money [...]. Then there will be movements that don't have a lot of money, that don't have opportunities to express themselves and so on, and then we kind of have a responsibility, knowing about those structures, to be able to try to even them out [...]. And then you don't want the documentation to be a tool for reproducing a bad structure, so that the large organisations get everything [...], so that those who can afford it... But it's difficult because if we take the approach that we do now, that we offer a service, it might still be the case that it is the large organisations that are able to do their own documentation... (Jonas Danielsson, interview, September 2008, my translation from Swedish).

As we have seen, proponents of the documentation projects and OpenFSM have a lot invested in the openness of the tools and services that they provide; in theory, these are available for anyone to use. On most occasions, however, they appear to have generated very little interest, and only a minority of Forum participants have taken advantage of the tools made available to them. At the WSF 2009, the Convergence Square – which as the name suggests was intended to facilitate convergence by providing a space where participants could post the outcomes of their discussions and view outcomes posted by others – received very few visitors. According to Annette Nilsson, who helped organise the Square, no more than 25 outcomes were collected (interview, February 2009). During the ESF 2008, 'outcome forms' were provided at all forum venues for participants to register their outcomes, and on the final day of the event a closing session was planned in which all the proposals were to be posted on the walls of a great hall for participants to browse. However, only around 40

outcomes were collected in total, including outcomes submitted after the event, and hardly anyone attended the closing session.<sup>80</sup>

Proponents of the documentation projects point to a number of organisational failures to account for this gap between intentions and end results. One relates to the tendency of Forum organisers to concentrate solely on the immediate task of organising an *event* and not give adequate thought to the more long-term strategic importance of documentation. Another explanation focuses on the failure of organisers to inform Forum participants adequately about the documentation initiatives. Chico Whitaker explains the failure of the Convergence Square in these terms: '[we began] very late, we didn't circulate sufficient information within the Forum. Very few people found out what it was' (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

On one level, this is an obvious point: in order to make use of a service people need to know about it. But it also highlights a more deep-rooted problem with the 'laissez faire' approach adopted by organisers in order to conform to the open space format. Such an approach is very much dependent for its success on autonomous and self-directed action by forum participants; a critical mass of groups and organisations must seek actively to take advantage of the mechanisms put in place in order for these to work. While the most obvious explanation for the low take-up might be that people are simply not aware of them, the lack of interest in these initiatives also suggests that they have limited appeal among forum participants.

One possible explanation for this is that they are based on a rather procedural conception of the processes by which convergences happen, which arguably bears little relation to the more organic way in which alliances are forged and knowledge exchanged within the

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<sup>80</sup>The Mural of Proposal at the WSF 2003 and 2005 gathered a higher number of proposals (though still fairly small relative to the number of self-organised activities); the problem with these, according to organisers, in addition to a general lack of interest from Forum participants, was their dispersed and fragmented nature, an issue I return to below.

WSF. The outcomes projects are based on a model according to which a group will post their own proposal, then search for other proposals of interest in the same category, and if they find anything of interest, contact the group responsible. Similarly, the assumption that newcomers will seek to connect with the WSF process by searching an online database evinces a somewhat mechanical conception of how connections are made. If we are to follow recent theorisations of networked social movements, convergences are likely to happen in a much more fluid and rhizomatic manner than this (Chesters & Welsh, 2005, 2006; Escobar, 2004b, 2007a; Sen, 2007).

Developing this line of argument further, it might be said that the proceduralism that informs the documentation projects is underpinned by a rationalist conception of knowledge production, which values analytic reasoning and textual forms of representation over more affective understanding and non-verbal forms of expression. The documentation that these projects have sought to collect has been primarily text-based, and they have incorporated procedures – such as filling in forms, registering outcomes<sup>81</sup> online, searching websites, etc. – that may appear logical to activists accustomed to the information-intensive audit culture that is becoming prominent in the NGO world (Mueller-Hirth, 2010), but which might not be the most obvious way to connect with others for, for example, indigenous peoples' movements in the Amazon. Moema Miranda couched this issue in terms of a distinction between European and other ways of thinking:

[At] the European Social Forum usually it's easier because it's smaller and it's more homogeneous [...] and you have the same kind of mentality of documenting. It's quite different here [in the Amazon], because you have indigenous people, you have many people that are not used to kind of formal registration of their activity. So the diversity is quite huge, so unless you have [...] [large] numbers of researchers all in the whole territory taking notes and going and trying to find out, you will have in the end only the registration of

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<sup>81</sup> The idea that workshops and seminars have 'outcomes' is arguably also a rather procedural and rationalist conception of movement dynamics.

the European side of the forum, not the whole forum (interview, January 2009).

While one might want to problematise the distinction between Europe and 'the rest' that is invoked here, the point being made about who the documentation projects might appeal to raises important questions about their *de facto* openness. While in theory documentation tools are available for anyone to use, not everyone does. As Jonas Danielsson suggests in the extract quoted at the beginning of this section, it may be that only organisations that have the necessary resources are in a position to take advantage of the tools on offer. As the point made by Moema Miranda highlights, it may also be that the way in which these projects are designed ends up favouring actors with certain types of skills, organisational cultures, and forms of knowledge production.

Such questions about the openness-in-practice of these projects resonate strongly with debates about the emancipatory potential of the internet outlined in Chapter 1, and become particularly pertinent in the case of the OpenFSM website, which suffers similar problems in terms of inclusiveness. At the time of writing (24 September 2011), the site has 2447 registered users, which is quite small compared to the tens of thousands of people that participate in any given edition of the WSF. While OpenFSM might in theory be – as Ethan Jucovy suggests in the extract quoted on page 156 – ‘the *open* World Social Forum, where anyone can just do whatever they want’, the reality appears to be somewhat different. The website is neither as open nor as global as its proponents would like it to be. The technical skills, time, and – not least – constant internet access required to maintain spaces on the site constitute significant barriers to entry; not only for people on the ‘wrong’ side of the digital divide, but also for relatively privileged activists.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> During my fieldwork, a number of communication activists – who are probably among the most technologically literate – complained about the complexity and difficulty of using

The architects behind the site acknowledge this, and have tried in various ways to educate WSF activists about it. At the WSF 2009, for example, a group of FLOSS activists organised workshops on how to use OpenFSM. To a certain extent, ameliorating the low usage of the site is a question of familiarising activists with new tools and working practices. Undoubtedly, part of the solution to the digital divide that exists within the WSF lies in raising skills levels and awareness of new ways of working so that activists can use tools to their advantage. At the same time, the issues raised above highlight the need to think carefully about how the development of such tools relates to the open and horizontal politics that activists aspire to.

As Nunes (2005c) argues, the currently widespread ideals of openness and horizontality cannot be abstracted from the historical and material context in which they have emerged: the restructuring of 'advanced' capitalist economies associated with the passage from Fordism to post-Fordism and the transformations in communication technologies that have facilitated this shift.

The large scale massification of these media, and a multipolar medium like the internet in particular, is thus the chief material cause behind the 'renaissance' of openness and horizontality. It is only within the horizon of a social life that has become networked that a politics of networking as such can appear. And it is only in a politics of networking that openness and horizontality can appear as a goal (Nunes, 2005c: 301).

Nunes (2005c) cautions against the universalisation and abstraction from their material context of particular models of openness and horizontality, making the obvious but crucial point that the material conditions that make networked politics possible in the global North are not equally available to movements in the global South.

Seen in this light, the ethos of openness that underpins the initiatives discussed in this chapter might be understood as rooted in culturally specific practices and ideals.<sup>83</sup> In particular, the idea of

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OpenFSM.

<sup>83</sup> This is not to say it can be explained in terms of a simple North-South divide; differences

publicness – in the sense of free circulation of information – as a means to facilitate bottom-up convergence and fulfil the WSF’s promise of openness is expressive of a cultural logic which takes the ability to circulate information for granted. According to this logic, ensuring transparency, and preventing exclusion and hegemonic closure – i.e. making the WSF ‘truly’ open – all depend on the capacity of actors to produce and circulate information. Insofar as openness equals globality, so does the possibility of the WSF being ‘truly’ global.

However, the openness of the tools discussed here depends on activists having the skills, time, resources, and – not least – the *inclination* to use them. Because they are modelled on procedural and rational models of knowledge production and based largely on textual forms of representation, there is a risk that they in effect exclude large sectors of the WSF ‘universe’. This raises questions about the capacity of such approaches to facilitate autonomous knowledge production ‘from below’ and their ability to express the epistemic diversity of the WSF.

The initiatives discussed in this chapter also suffer from a tendency towards fragmentation and disorganisation. With regards to the documentation projects, this has not necessarily been a problem in cases where only a few outcomes were documented (such as in Belém and Malmö). However, at forums where several hundred proposals are collected, the question of how to navigate through them becomes more of an issue. This often has been compounded by the absence of a clear and comprehensive classification system; the proposals from the WSF 2003, for example, are simply listed on the Forum website in alphabetical order by keywords, which appear to have been assigned by participants themselves without following any particular logic. The OpenFSM site suffers from similar problems. Its 2447 users are spread over 481 project spaces (as of 24 September

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exist within countries and regions as well as between them.

2011); a number of these are dormant 'ghost' spaces and several have only a handful of members. Many activists I spoke to complained about the difficulty of navigating their way through the different spaces. As Annette Nilsson explained:

On the first page the newest and most recently updated spaces are listed, so you get information this way, but it might be that often the newest spaces have little information, which is not very interesting, and the most recently updated, it might be that there is some keen and diligent person who sits there and updates their pages all the time, but it might not be the most interesting ones that come up. So then you have to start searching the alphabetical lists. Say I am interested in Brazil - B - well you find nothing on Brazil there. There may be three pages that have something to do with Brazil but which are listed under other letters, so then you have to start going through everything (interview, February 2009, my translation from Swedish).

The way OpenFSM is designed means that there is no mechanism for organising spaces by thematic area or geographical region, making it rather difficult and time-consuming to find information and make connections. The site's 'flat' design might be conceived as informed by the diffuse sense of globality that is often associated with the internet. By placing all its spaces on the same level, OpenFSM implicitly scales them all as global, without taking into account the importance of place that was highlighted in Chapter 1 or that users may want to connect with others in the same region or country.

The point here is not simply to criticise design flaws and organisational inefficiencies, but rather to draw out some of the contradictions of the open space model. As we have seen, the decentralised and 'flat' design of these tools is, to a considerable degree, informed by a commitment to autonomy and respect for diversity, as well as a desire to capture the richness of the WSF and avoid hegemonic closure. One of their key aims is to facilitate convergence without imposing any kind of top-down control. Many of the problems outlined above might be ameliorated with better organisation, more resources, and the introduction of a proper

classification system.<sup>84</sup> However, they stem at least partly from the 'laissez-faire' interpretation of the open space concept, which posits that official representatives of the Forum cannot act in a 'political' or directive manner. Organisation is also made difficult by the absence of clearly defined decision-making procedures and mechanisms for dividing responsibilities. This has meant that outcomes and proposals have been spread over a number of different websites. Some of these have been event-specific sites; others have been created as part of short-term projects. Many such sites have closed down as the funding for a particular project or event has run out. In brief, with no central body to coordinate documentation efforts – apart from the organising committees of different forum events and more or less ad hoc groups working on a project basis – these frequently end up being dispersed, ironically replicating the fragmentation they partly were intended to ameliorate.

### ***Conclusion***

The initiatives discussed in this chapter are motivated by a commitment to autonomy and plurality, transparency and inclusion, and the prevention of hegemonic closure. However, despite good intentions, they have never quite lived up to their promises. The seeming inability of the 'laissez-faire' approach to documentation to ensure the diversity that its proponents aim for suggests that a change is needed in the way that the open space concept commonly is conceived. As Sen argues: '*open space is not inherently open, neutral, or equal, let alone progressive; it can only be so if we struggle for it to be so*' (2010: 1014, emphasis in original). More explicitly, it is 'critical to recognize that inequalities among

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<sup>84</sup> Mikael Böök, a Finnish activist and member of the Network Institute for Global Democratization (NIGD) who has been at the forefront of the WSF Library Project, has argued frequently for the need to develop a comprehensive and relatively permanent classification system for the WSF (e.g. Böök, 2010).

movements get reproduced in the open space unless there is affirmative action to ensure that marginalized and minority populations are present and their voices and perspectives amplified' (Conway, 2008d: 62). In other words, there is a need for a shift in emphasis from openness-in-principle to inclusiveness-in-practice. This raises interesting questions about how WSF communication activists might actively seek out and include marginalised voices, and suggests that extending the WSF public might require a greater degree of 'intentionality' (Juris, 2008b) than the 'laissez faire' interpretation of open space allows for.<sup>85</sup>

The shortcomings identified above also raise questions about the ability of the open space approach to facilitate 'bottom up' processes of convergence. Issues of fragmentation aside, the initiatives discussed in this chapter are underpinned by a somewhat procedural conception of convergence, which does not necessarily correspond to the actual on-the-ground processes through which knowledge is exchanged and movement networks constructed within the WSF. The documentation projects in particular assume a linear model in which WSF participants document their proposals, which are then, by virtue of being documented, reified as 'positions' belonging to particular groups (cf. Nunes, 2005c). These groups, in turn, are conceived as discrete units, which seek out connections with one another on the basis of their stated positions. This is perhaps stretching the point, but it highlights the possibility that the logic that underpins these projects might not correspond to the sometimes difficult, inherently political, and ideally pedagogical processes of

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<sup>85</sup> The notion of 'intentionality' was employed by the organisers of the 2007 United States Social Forum (USSF) to describe their outreach strategy, which was aimed specifically at recruiting grassroots organisations with bases among historically marginalised groups to participate in the organisation of the forum. This strategy, which resulted in an unprecedented racial, class, sexual, and gender diversity (Guerrero, 2008; Juris, 2008b; J. Smith, Juris et al., 2008), was based on the assessment by organisers that if they simply left the space of the USSF open to anyone who wanted to participate, it would end up being dominated by the 'usual suspects': large NGOs led by 'white liberals' and direct action anarchist groups which also are made up of predominantly white middle class activists (Juris, 2008b).

dialogue and translation that are required in order to arrive at shared understandings. The challenge for organisers and communication activists who want to facilitate convergences is to find ways to respond to and work with such complex dynamics.

A broader question that arises from this chapter relates to the character of the public that is imagined by proponents of these initiatives. As we have seen, they all have as a key aim to make the knowledges and practices of WSF participants publicly available, but what does this actually mean? The fact that information made available online is in theory accessible to anyone in the world and the frequent reference that proponents of these projects make to visibility are suggestive of a somewhat diffuse 'global public' of interested citizens who seek out and find information online. However, the dispersed character of these initiatives raises questions about their effectiveness in circulating the discourses of WSF participants beyond those already 'in the know' (and even this more specific public is imagined as made up of rational actors who actively seek out and act on information). Moreover, the general lack of interest among WSF participants in the documentation tools made available to them suggests that they are of limited value in terms of stimulating a sense of belonging to a global WSF public.

In brief, the limitations identified in this chapter suggest that a more proactive approach is needed in order to include less powerful actors, respond more organically to the ways in which convergences happen within social movement networks, and generate a sense of identification with the WSF. While it might not be possible or desirable for the WSF *as* the WSF to act in such an intentional manner, it might be able to provide conditions in which actors within the Forum can do so. The next chapter considers this possibility by exploring the development by alternative media activists of a politics and practice of communication for the WSF which they refer to as 'shared communication'.

## 5. 'Another communication is possible!' Alternative media and the concept of shared communication

*[The Forum process] has two models of communication. One is, let's say, the currently existing communication structure of the Forum office, and the other is the political process of communication within the Forum [...]. One works a bit according to the concept of a press office, of supporting people for the Forum, the other works on the question of communication as a political, autonomous, self-managed process within the Forum (Marcos Urupá, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>86</sup>*

*The mass media works with a myth of journalism, which is the myth of impartiality, which we know is a lie [...]. Impartiality doesn't exist, in the same way as objectivity doesn't exist, when there is a subject behind. So journalism is not impartial [...]. I think that Ciranda says very clearly what side it is on, and that this is not the side of those in power, of the big corporations, of Empire, of big capital, of the transnationals [...]. [Ciranda] doesn't try to pass itself off to the reader as impartial and reproduce this myth that the mass media creates. It states clearly that it is on the side of the disadvantaged, those who need visibility, who need to be included in debates about public policy. This is a fundamental difference (Soraya Misleh, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>87</sup>*

This chapter explores the practices and ideas of alternative media activists who have sought to construct 'another communication' using the WSF as a space for experimentation and network-building. As the first interview extract quoted above suggests, these activists conceive of their model of communication as following a very different logic from that of the WSF's 'official' communication, in the sense that it is not so much concerned with 'publicising' the Forum as with strengthening movement-based communication processes. It is also,

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<sup>86</sup> Marcos Urupá is a member of Intervozes, a Brazilian NGO that works for the democratisation of communication. He is based in Belém and was one of the coordinators of the Communication Working Group for the WSF 2009.

<sup>87</sup> Soraya Misleh is a Brazilian journalist of Palestinian descent who lives in São Paulo. She is a regular contributor to Ciranda, the network of independent journalists and social movement communicators that has developed within the WSF process.

as Soraya Misleh explains in the extract quoted above, explicitly political and partisan. The concept and practice of communication that these activists have developed has come to be known, in Portuguese, as *comunicação compartilhada*, which can be translated as ‘shared communication’.<sup>88</sup> Initially conceived as a method for sharing alternative media coverage of the WSF, ‘shared communication’ also has come to signify collaborative and participatory processes of media production. Inspired by what commonly are seen as the key guiding principles of the Forum – horizontality, self-organisation, and solidarity across difference – the development of shared communication has been, in the words of one of its key proponents, about constructing ‘a communication project, a politics and concept of communication for the WSF’ (Rita Freire, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>89</sup>

This chapter considers how shared communication might contribute to extending the WSF public by facilitating the construction of networks of alternative media and social movement communicators. This approach works not only by enabling the circulation of media content but also through what I describe as a movement-building approach, which seeks to mobilise new actors to participate in communication and construct relations of ‘thick’ solidarity based on a sense of mutuality, reciprocity, and common purpose. Having started as an initiative organised by Brazilian activists involved in the first social forums in Porto Alegre, shared communication has in some respects retained a national orientation, discernible in a strong sense of collective identity among Brazilian

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<sup>88</sup> A more accurate translation might be ‘shared and participatory communication’, as the verb *compartilhar* in Portuguese can mean both ‘share’ and ‘participate’. Within the WSF, however, *comunicação compartilhada* generally is translated as ‘shared communication’. I will use the same term here for consistency and convenience, while acknowledging that it does not quite capture the full meaning of the Portuguese term.

<sup>89</sup> Rita Freire is a Brazilian journalist and communication activist based in São Paulo. She is one of the main coordinators of the Ciranda network, a member of the Communication Commission, and has played a key role in developing the concept and practice of shared communication.

communication activists and in the efforts of some to disseminate their content via national public broadcasters. At the same time, shared communication has from the outset also had a global ambition. This is evident, first, in the emphasis that its proponents place on facilitating sharing of alternative media content online, and second, in their efforts to construct transnational networks and involve activists from other parts of the world in collaborative communication practices that can facilitate translation across difference.

The chapter starts by providing a brief outline of the development and key features of shared communication. I then move on to consider how it might contribute to extending the WSF public, looking first at the dissemination of media coverage. Shared communication activists differ in the way that they envisage their public. While some want to engage with a general public beyond those already connected to the WSF, and consequently seek to gain space for their content in mass media, others conceptualise their public in explicitly counterpublic terms as constituted by people who already identify with the WSF. In the latter perspective, extending the WSF public is as much about mobilising this counterpublic to participate in communication as it is about disseminating persuasive media messages. I explore some of the key features of this movement-building approach, highlighting how shared communication activists seek to enable social movements to do their own communication while simultaneously seeking to integrate them within a transversal movement for the democratisation of communication.

Next, I consider how shared communication might be implicated in processes of knowledge production in the WSF. I suggest that it not only affirms epistemic plurality but also has the potential to facilitate translation between different knowledges by creating spaces of sociality and ‘thick’ networks that facilitate mutual learning and cross-fertilisation. However, this work of translation is

not easy. Through some brief examples from the Belém WSF, I highlight some of the challenges involved in practicing shared communication at the global scale, focusing on the difficulties involved in trying to work collaboratively across political, cultural, and linguistic differences, and reconciling participatory media production with other priorities when time and resources are in short supply. I conclude by highlighting the social foundations of the publics that shared communication activists seek to construct, and suggest that one of the main ways in which they may contribute to extending the WSF public is by enabling the proliferation of shared communication practices around the world.

### ***Developing a politics and concept of communication for the WSF***

I don't see the Forum as an event which needs a press office. I see it as a political space that you want to construct for communication (Rita Freire, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

The idea of shared communication emerged on the eve of the first WSF in 2001 out of a concern that the event would not get very good media coverage. Organisers were worried that mainstream media would most likely either present a distorted image of the Forum or simply ignore it altogether, while alternative media lacked the resources required to produce comprehensive coverage of such a large event. Antonio Martins, editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil* and member of the International Council (IC), was part of a small team within the WSF 2001 organising committee responsible for communication. He described how the idea of shared communication was conceived in the following terms:

Sometime before World Social Forum one [...] we understood that it would not be possible to do a good coverage of the World Social Forum. So we decided to create a network based on copyleft, a network in which everyone could share texts, based on the idea that the World Social Forum was so big, it was

impossible to cover it with small teams, with the very small teams the social movements or independent media have. So we established the shared principle: any article published by anyone could be used by others, anyone who [...] offers use of their article to the network has the right to use in their newspaper all other articles. It was a great success, this idea. Also because [...] we were able to offer people [an immediate] publication system [...] a contents editor. A content editor was something very unknown at that time. So it was a technological novelty, which allowed people to make their visions of the World Social Forum immediately known by people in every part of the world. This is how Ciranda happened (interview, January 2009).

Ciranda (which in Portuguese refers to a form of circular dance) was the name given to this web publication system and the network of communicators that it brought together. Ciranda might be understood as an attempt to extend the WSF public at a global scale, in the sense that by taking advantage of the potential of the internet and innovative licencing schemes, it was perceived, as Martins suggests, as making it possible to reach people 'in every part of the world'. At a time before web 2.0 technologies were widely available, Ciranda offered unprecedented opportunities for sharing alternative media coverage, and was conceived as a means for independent journalists and movement activists to bypass conventional media and construct their own (potentially global) communication networks online.<sup>90</sup> The shared communication proposal enjoyed immediate success: an estimated 300 articles were published on Ciranda during the first WSF (Antonio Martins, interview, January 2009), and in the following year, around 800 communicators registered to participate in the initiative (Rita Freire, interview, March 2009).

Having emerged initially out of a need to facilitate sharing of media *content*, the concept of shared communication soon acquired a much broader significance. Ciranda not only offered an online platform for alternative media coverage of the WSF; it also provided the occasion for communication activists to come together, get to

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<sup>90</sup> Of course, as shown in Chapter 4, the simple fact of content being circulated online is by itself no guarantee of globality or inclusiveness; what is perhaps most significant here is the *sense* of globality engendered by the technological novelty of Ciranda. I discuss this affective dimension of new communication technologies in more detail in Chapter 7.

know one another, and begin to build networks. The coordinators found that by bringing together independent journalists and movement communicators in the same physical location to produce shared coverage, they also created spaces of sociality that encouraged dialogue and a sense of common purpose. In this way, the conception emerged that shared communication is as much about the experience of sharing a space, exchanging knowledge, and working together with others as it is about sharing content.

This initial experiment also became the seed from which grew a more permanent network, particularly among Brazilian communication activists involved in the Porto Alegre forums, who assumed a key role in organising subsequent exercises in shared communication (Rita Freire, interview, March 2009).<sup>91</sup> By bringing communicators together in this way, the WSF has been instrumental to the emergence of what activists themselves define as a communication *movement* in Brazil, which increasingly also has developed transnational links. Over the years, Ciranda has developed from an annual exercise in producing shared coverage of the WSF to a permanent initiative for alternative news relating to the Forum's thematic areas. Coordinated by a nucleus of Brazilian activists, but with collaborators in various parts of the world, Ciranda has become a reference point for the communication movement in Brazil and for the concept of shared communication within the WSF.

Under the motto 'another communication is possible', the activists involved in this emerging Brazilian communication movement have had as a key objective to develop a model of communication that is in keeping with the principles of the WSF and follows a different logic from that of commercial mass media. A key feature of shared communication is its prefigurative character, as one activist explained:

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<sup>91</sup> While the first edition of Ciranda had been managed from within the WSF office, it later became a self-organised initiative, coordinated by activists not formally connected to the organising committee.

One of the objectives [of shared communication] is to test different models and dynamics connected to the concepts that we defend, of sharing, of free knowledge, of working collectively. These are important because they [...] demonstrate concretely that another world is possible, or in other words, another world is possible, and we can show how. Kind of, another world is not just possible; this is an example of the other possible world. It's like this with the proposals for the environment, with the proposals of solidarity economy, and also with communication (Adriano de Angelis, interview, January 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>92</sup>

The concept and practice of shared communication was consolidated with the development of a set of shared communication 'projects' for the WSF 2005 in Porto Alegre. Alongside Ciranda, which initially had focused primarily on text- and image-based journalism, these included the 'TV Forum', for people working with audio-visual media, and the 'Radio Forum', for independent and community radios.<sup>93</sup> Moulded on activists' experience from previous social forums (including the first three editions of the WSF as well as the 2003 Brazilian Social Forum), these projects were housed in an alternative media centre which provided the necessary infrastructure. The TV Forum, coordinated by a nucleus of experienced activists, provided editing equipment as well as assistance to anyone not familiar with its use, and an agreement was made that the content that was produced would be shared among participants. As a result of a deal that coordinators negotiated with *Radiobrás* - the then broadcasting company of the Brazilian federal government - the videos that were produced were put together in an hour-long programme entitled *Panorama Fórum*, which was shown daily on Brazilian public television during the WSF and distributed to the rest of Latin America via *TV Brasil Canal Integración* (a Brazilian Spanish-language channel

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<sup>92</sup> Adriano de Angelis is a Brazilian communication activist, based in Brasilia, who works for TV Brasil. He was one of the main coordinators of the TV Forum at the WSF 2005 and participated in the organisation of the 2009 TV Forum in Belém.

<sup>93</sup> There was also a fourth 'shared project', the Free Knowledge Laboratory (*Laboratório de Conhecimentos Livres*), which was a more loosely organised space within the Youth Camp that hosted workshops and discussions about free software and digital culture.

with a regional remit).<sup>94</sup> The Radio Forum, meanwhile, brought together independent and community radios which shared equipment and divided a programming schedule between them using FM transmission and online streaming.

These projects allowed shared communication activists to consolidate their experience from previous years and stake a claim for shared communication to be considered an integral part of the WSF process. They managed to secure the support of the IC, thus establishing the Forum's responsibility to support alternative media while asserting their autonomy as self-organised initiatives. As the WSF left Porto Alegre and 'globalised', Brazilian communication activists sought to bring the concept and practice of shared communication to new actors, and subsequent forums provided occasions for them to create links and exchange experiences with their counterparts in other parts of the world. Ciranda already had been involved in organising shared coverage of the WSF 2004 in India, and in 2006 Brazilian activists participated in the organisation of shared communication projects, including a TV and Radio Forum, at the Caracas edition of the polycentric WSF.<sup>95</sup> In 2007 Ciranda worked with local activists to mobilise for and organise independent media coverage of the Nairobi forum, but there were no shared communication projects as such.

When the WSF returned to Brazil for its next centralised edition in 2009, it offered the opportunity to revive the projects. As in 2005, the Belém WSF provided the occasion for a TV Forum, a Radio Forum, and another edition of Ciranda, all of which were housed together in an alternative media centre on the premises of the Faculty of Communication (FACOM) at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), one

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<sup>94</sup> *Radiobrás* later became incorporated into *Empresa Brasil de Comunicação* [Brazil Communication Company] – the Brazilian public broadcasting company created in 2007 which is responsible for the country's public television and radio stations).

<sup>95</sup> The TV Forum that was organised in Caracas produced a similar *Panorama Fórum* programme, which was shown by Brazilian public broadcasters (nationally and regionally) and by Venezuelan television.

of the forum sites. These projects brought together a number of different actors, including communicators from Belém and surrounding areas, activists with experience from Porto Alegre, and various alternative media from elsewhere in Brazil and other parts of the world. In preparation for the forum, members of the Communication Working Group for the WSF 2009 set up a 'Shared Communication Laboratory', which was in operation for a few weeks prior to the event. Hosted by CEPEPO, a local NGO that worked with audio-visual media as a tool for popular education, the Laboratory organised a series of workshops bringing together communication activists, representatives from various social movements, students from UFPA, and local residents. During these workshops, participants discussed the significance of communication for social movements, began to produce media content relating to the WSF, and made plans for how to organise the shared coverage of the event itself.

Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to account for the trajectories of all of the groups that participated in 2009, there are two sets of experiences from outside of the Brazilian context which have been significant to the development of shared communication, especially to the way in which the projects were implemented in Belém. In the area of audio-visual media, an important contribution has come from Focuspuller, an Italian audio-visual collective which originated with the ESF 2002 in Florence, where activists set up a TV station that broadcast during the forum. The collective has since covered various social forums around the world, and participated in the WSF Communication Commission. They played a key role during the Global Day of Action in 2008, helping to set up a website for video sharing and coordinating the production of audio-visual coverage of events taking place around the world. This website (<http://wsftv.net>) has since become a platform for sharing audio-visual coverage relating to the WSF. Focuspuller also has had a longstanding arrangement to supply content in the form of daily highlights from social forums and other similar events to the

Eurovision television network. Its coordinator played a key role in the preparation of the 2009 TV Forum.

The concept of a Radio Forum, meanwhile, has a trajectory that predates the WSF. Developed by a loosely connected network of European and Latin American independent and community radios, the idea originated with the peoples' summits that accompanied official summits of European and Latin American heads of state. Radio Forums have since been held in connection with various social movement gatherings, including social forums and counter-summits (undoubtedly resulting in cross-fertilisation with the shared communication projects). Based on similar principles of sharing, Radio Forums involve various groups working together, using the same online streaming and FM transmission, exchanging ideas and experiences. More of a concept than an organised initiative, there are usually different groups participating each time. In Belém, these included various independent radios from Europe and a sizeable (predominantly Latin American) contingent associated with AMARC (World Association of Community Radios).

During the WSF 2009, these groups worked alongside local actors and activists from elsewhere in Brazil. Apart from Focuspuller, the main actors behind the TV Forum were members of CEPEPO and a few experienced communication activists from elsewhere in Brazil who came to help with the organisation. On this occasion, the TV Forum did not produce a daily hour-long *Panorama Fórum* programme (for reasons I will return to), but individual videos produced by participants were shown by the state-wide *TV Cultura do Pará*<sup>96</sup> and distributed nationally and regionally through the *TV Brasil* network. Content in the form of daily highlights was also distributed via the Eurovision network.<sup>97</sup> In addition, participants uploaded videos

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<sup>96</sup> *TV Cultura do Pará* is a public television station belonging to Funtelpa (*Fundação de Telecomunicações do Pará*), the public broadcasting company in the state of Pará.

<sup>97</sup> According to an evaluation report from the WSF 2009, content from the TV Forum was

to the WSF TV website. The Radio Forum, meanwhile, was made up of two main groups: the transnational Radio Forum network described above, which broadcast using online streaming, and a group of local community radios which set up an FM radio station that transmitted live from FACOM. As I discuss in more detail later, the convergence of these diverse actors entailed a sometimes difficult exercise in translation. First, I consider how the shared communication practices might contribute to extending the WSF public.

### ***Who is the public? Disseminating alternative media coverage***

A forum is a space for everybody, so everybody takes their goal to the forum, their ideas. My idea is to try to not only speak inside of the circle where there already is a network but try to involve more people (Antonio Pacor, interview, December 2008).<sup>98</sup>

I think those who access Ciranda are people interested in alternative media coverage, communication professionals [...], people from the movements, linked to the movements, activists, militants, journalism students, communication students, other humanities students, people linked to human rights. It seems to me – I don't know, I don't have this information, but I imagine so – that this is the principal public that seeks out information in a media outlet like Ciranda (Soraya Misleh, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

The most obvious way in which shared communication might contribute to extending the WSF public is perhaps by facilitating the circulation of alternative media content on the internet. The provision of web platforms where people can upload and share content, combined with the use of copyleft licensing, means that articles, images, videos, and audio pieces can be circulated widely and rapidly, reaching a potentially global audience. However, although such communication networks are potentially global in reach in the sense that anyone in the world can in theory connect to them, not

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distributed via Eurovision and 'reached around 50 public broadcasters in Europe, 8 in Latin America and a few in Asia' (WSF Communication Commission, 2009: 5).

<sup>98</sup> Antonio Pacor is the coordinator of Focuspuller. He is a member of the Communication Commission and played a key role in the preparation of the 2009 TV Forum.

everybody does. Inequalities of access aside (a far from trivial issue), the dispersed character of the internet means that in order to come across alternative media content people need to know where to look. As Soraya Misleh suggests in the interview extract quoted above, the public that accesses Ciranda is a public that consciously seeks out alternative news.

Some shared communication activists therefore have sought, in addition to publishing content online, to engage with general publics by disseminating their content through more traditional communication channels. This dual politics (cf. Cohen & Arato, 1992; Juris, 2008a: 9) has been particularly discernible among activists involved in audio-visual production.

We have to split the two things that we try to do. One is to try to work with social movements, grassroots, and share, use this website that we opened, where the concept is that you have to accept the Charter of the Forum and then share video [...]. And on the other side [...] also try to distribute to international media, the video, in the form of highlights (Antonio Pacor, interview, December 2008).

As outlined earlier, activists involved in the TV Forum have developed agreements by which their content has been distributed to various TV stations (within Brazil and South America through Brazilian public television and to national public broadcasters in Europe and elsewhere through the Eurovision network). As one Brazilian TV Forum coordinator explained, an explicit objective of this has been to make alternative media coverage available to a general public:

Just as important as guaranteeing the structure to enable the shared communication projects to take place, it is necessary to guarantee institutional links with public media so that this content is made available to the largest possible number of people [...]. Ok, it is very important that we provide the space, the instruments, the production equipment that enable co-presence, exchange of experiences, and the creation of a record of the Forum [...]. At the same time, as important as creating this record is making it available to the largest number of people possible. That means recognising the mass media as a fundamental interface for dialogue between independent media production and society (Adriano de Angelis, interview, January 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

The agreements that Brazilian TV Forum coordinators have developed with public broadcasters constitute an interesting example of social movements succeeding in gaining space within mass media without necessarily having to modify their discourses to resonate with dominant news frames. Particularly in 2005, when they were guaranteed a one-hour slot during the WSF which they were free to fill in whichever way they wanted, TV Forum coordinators managed to secure a direct outlet in mass media for content produced by WSF participants. Such success stories are, however, relatively rare.<sup>99</sup> Usually, as discussed in Chapter 1, gaining space in mass media means adapting to dominant criteria of newsworthiness. That this is the case is apparent in the way that Antonio Pacor envisaged engaging with TV stations that receive their content through Eurovision:

You go to the office of a TV, they have, in the news gathering room, they have ten to twenty [television screens], they have some satellite feeds of news that are broadcasting stuff all day, and when it is time to make the news, and also before, they see what is moving, and you have to hook their attention (interview, December 2008).

While some shared communication activists see it as important to engage with general publics outside of those already involved in or aware of the WSF, and attempt to do so via ‘mainstream’ media, others do not see this as a priority.<sup>100</sup> One common argument is that

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<sup>99</sup> In this particular case, the opening made available was largely the outcome of close links between Brazilian communication activists and *Radiobrás*. A number of activists involved in the shared communication projects had started working for the company following the election of the Lula government, with the objective of contributing to the development of a Brazilian public broadcasting system that reflected their vision of a more democratic media (TV Forum coordinator, interview, March 2009).

<sup>100</sup> It might be argued that Brazilian public television blurs the boundaries of what can be considered ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’, given the close involvement of social movement activists in its development and its relatively marginal market position vis-à-vis the commercial giants that dominate the Brazilian media landscape. Importantly, while Brazilian TV Forum coordinators have worked actively to construct links with public television, most of them would stop short of engaging with commercial broadcasters. The efforts of the Italian activists to distribute content via Eurovision constitute an interesting ‘limit case’, in the sense that Eurovision distributes content to hundreds of broadcasters around the world, not all of which are public in the sense of being non-commercial.

efforts to engage with such media draw valuable energy and resources away from the objective of strengthening movements' own media, which should be the main concern. As one Radio Forum participant explained:

A lot of people are more focused on mainstream media [...], how you can have more influence on the mainstream media. I think that is a very good idea, but not the most important, because then you forget to build your own media, to make it stronger, the people that are inside the process and the media that are inside the process, it is very important to make better, to make more used maybe, more efficient [...], sometimes more professional [...], more connected with each other (Pablo Eppelin, interview, January 2009).<sup>101</sup>

For many alternative media activists, engaging with 'mainstream' media, especially of the corporate variety, is not just futile but actually counterproductive to their aim of constructing more democratic forms of communication. Not only does spending time and energy on trying to gain space in such media draw attention away from building movements' own media, it also serves to validate the existence of, and thus strengthen, the one-to-many model of communication that these activists are struggling against. Instead of seeking inclusion in the dominant publics constituted by such media, many therefore advocate alternative strategies based on strengthening movements' own communication capacities, envisaging the eventual shrinking and displacement of corporate media systems. Rita Freire succinctly summarised the rationale behind this line of thinking in a remark on the relationship of the black people's movement to the media:

It's not that black people should have more space in *Rede Globo*. It is Globo that needs to have less space in society, because we have other things to do (interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Pablo Eppelin is a communication activist based the Netherlands who works with radio, video, and other media.

<sup>102</sup> *Rede Globo* [Globo Network] is the largest television network in Brazil. It is owned by *Organizações Globo*, the country's (and Latin America's) biggest media conglomerate, which controls 383 media outlets in Brazil, almost double that of its closest rival, *Sílvio Santos* (Görger, 2009).

In contrast to those who seek to engage with a general public by gaining space for their content in mass media, activists who adopt this more uncompromising position envisage their audience or readership in explicitly counterpublic terms:

H: Who do you want to reach through your coverage?

R: We want to reach people who are linked to social movements, people who are in some way committed or sensitised [...]. First, a universe that is [in agreement with] the Charter of Principles of the Forum. We are not [...] disseminators for those on the outside, this is another problem that the communication of the Forum has to confront, because, for us, it is the Forum movement itself that has to win these people who are on the outside over to the inside.

(Interview with Rita Freire, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese)

This does not preclude the possibility of attracting the attention of a more general public; Ciranda coverage being available online means it can be found by people anywhere who are not necessarily political radicals or actively involved in social movements. However, Freire is quite clear that Ciranda contributors should not modify their coverage to resonate with dominant news frames:

We know that our public is bigger [than those already involved in social movements], because we already write, already do things thinking that this public is present. But we don't have a market strategy to enlarge our market share [...]. The route that brings people to Ciranda is [...] interest in transformation or resistance. It's not the opposite, [that] I am going to write for someone doing tourism I don't know where, for this person to become sensitised to the Forum, you know, 'ah, it's summer, everyone is going to the beach, so let's do an article about the hot weather and the WSF, because people are going to read it'. We are not going to do this, we are not going to create artifice in order for people to pay attention to the Forum (interview, March 2009).

Both of the approaches outlined above appear to have advantages and disadvantages. The first offers the possibility to attract the attention of wider publics than those who intentionally seek out alternative media coverage online. However, insofar as it requires adapting to criteria of newsworthiness it comes with the risk of distortion and simplification. As discussed in Chapter 3, it also tends to involve engaging with publics that are predominantly national in

scale. It is, as we have seen, primarily with national public broadcasters that Brazilian activists have negotiated agreements, and although their content was also disseminated regionally via *Canal Integración*, the main concern of Brazilian TV Forum participants appears to have been to engage with a *national* public, as the following interview extract suggests:<sup>103</sup>

One of the objectives of the TV Forum is to allow Brazilian society to have access to the multiple visions, the multiplicity, the diversity of opinions that exist in the Forum (Adriano de Angelis, interview, January 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

The second approach, by being more uncompromisingly counterpublic, avoids the tendency towards distortion and simplification, and allows social movements to elaborate their own discourses within their own networks. The potentially global reach of media coverage made available online also appears to offer the possibility to construct publics at a global scale. However, inequalities of access and literacy aside, the boundaries of this kind of public will be limited by the reach of such oppositional discourses, in the sense that they mostly will attract the attention of people who already in some way identify with the ideals of the WSF.

How, in the latter case, might the WSF public be extended? A clue to one possible answer lies in the argument made by Rita Freire in the interview extract quoted above: that it is not communication *per se*, conceived in terms of dissemination, but movements themselves that are to mobilise people to join their struggles. This points towards an approach that seeks to extend the WSF public not only (or even primarily) through persuasive media *messages* but

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<sup>103</sup> Arguably, the public envisaged by Italian activists in their efforts to distribute content via Eurovision is more global in character, in the sense that the network distributes content to broadcasters worldwide; however, the majority of these are still national in remit, and, as discussed in Chapter 3, are likely to frame content in accordance with national news frames.

through a process of movement-building in which communication plays a more ‘subterranean’ – though no less vital – role.

***‘Communicate to mobilise to communicate...’ Extending the WSF public through movement-building***

[The shared communication projects] are nothing more, nothing less, than processes of mobilising groups that have [...] the aim of doing another communication within the Forum (Marcos Urupá, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).

I’m here and I do my coverage, but the fact of me being here has other effects, I speak to people, people speak to me... this is a bit this process of articulation and network-building [...]. I think this is very important, our participation in the coverage always has as a consequence that we are a living network (Andreas Behn, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>104</sup>

As discussed earlier, shared communication has been conceived by its proponents as equally concerned to facilitate democratic processes of media production as with the content that is produced. Though on the one hand, extending the WSF public involves enabling its discourses to gain wider circulation through the dissemination of media content, many shared communication activists are equally concerned (some more) with the processes through which such discourses are produced, and seek to involve as many people as possible in *doing* communication. In this respect, shared communication has close affinities with the Latin American tradition of participatory communication discussed in Chapter 1, which has emphasised the transformative effects of participatory communication and linked social change to the participation of historically marginalised groups in communication.

Particularly among Ciranda activists a strong commitment has developed to involving new actors in the practice of shared

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<sup>104</sup> Andreas Behn is the coordinator of PULSAR Brasil, a Rio-based information agency connected to AMARC which provides audio content to community radios. He played a key role in the organisation of the Radio Forum at the WSF 2009.

communication and empowering movements of historically marginalised groups to communicate. For example, Ciranda has developed close links with the black people's movement in Brazil, working in partnership with Afro-Brazilian organisations to set up projects for capacity-building that offer training in the use of communication tools. Consequently, Afro-Brazilian activists have played a prominent role in Ciranda. Such efforts are expressive of the more general sentiment that a key aim of shared communication is to 'give voice' to social movements, as one Ciranda contributor explained:

If the social movements manage to appropriate it, the function of Ciranda is this, to be a direct communication instrument for these social movements, for them to be able to communicate from the perspective of their own claims. I think this is the fundamental [role] of Ciranda: it is an instrument that enables social action. And it fulfils this role of training popular communicators. It gives everyone, without exception, the possibility to do communication (Glauciana Souza, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>105</sup>

Insofar as they seek to enable direct expression by groups and movements that participate in the WSF, the shared communication projects are motivated by the same concerns as the documentation projects described in the previous chapter: to make visible and validate the knowledges of such actors. However, in contrast to the 'laissez faire' approach of simply providing tools, proponents of shared communication work actively to encourage movements and grassroots groups to participate in shared communication practices. Shared communication activists – many of whom are linked organically (in the Gramscian sense) to the movements they report on – see themselves as *acting together with* rather than simply disseminating information *about* social movements.<sup>106</sup> In such a

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<sup>105</sup> Glauciana Souza is a contributor to Ciranda and member of *Soweto Organização Negra*, an NGO based in São Paulo that works to defend the rights of black people in Brazil.

<sup>106</sup> While such an explicitly political approach would be difficult to take for anyone acting in an 'official' capacity as 'representatives' of the WSF – due to the open space 'maxim' of not privileging any particular actors over others – shared communication activists are able to 'take sides' and present explicitly partisan accounts because of the shared

conception, communication and mobilisation for collective action are two sides of the same coin. The mutually reinforcing relationship between the two is captured eloquently in the slogan ‘communicate to mobilise to communicate...’ that is often used by shared communication activists.

Ultimately, what shared communication activists aim for is to build a broad movement for the democratisation of communication which would integrate all progressive social movements. As communication activists often do, proponents of shared communication tend to operate on two fronts (cf. Stein, 2009). Alongside efforts to construct their own democratic communication practices and produce alternative media coverage, many also are engaged in communication policy advocacy aimed at democratising the larger communication environment at the national as well as global scale. Such advocacy takes a number of forms, including efforts to influence government policies and legal frameworks, prevent concentration of private ownership, encourage the development of public media, and promote the right to communication.<sup>107</sup> Although such activism has enjoyed growing visibility in the past few years, and social movements increasingly are becoming aware of the importance of communication to their struggles (Léon, Burch, & Tamayo, 2001, 2005), communication activists have not yet managed to attract the broad support for their objectives that, for example, the environmental and human rights movements have (Stein, 2009). A key challenge for communication activists is therefore to persuade other social movements, all of which

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communication projects’ status as self-organised initiatives within the WSF.  
<sup>107</sup> For case studies of movements for democratic communication, see Stein, Kidd and Rodríguez (2009). The concept of the ‘right to communicate’ was first articulated by Jean D’Arcy (1969) and was further developed in the context of debates in the 1970s within UNESCO about a New World Information and Communication Order, which resulted in the MacBride report (UNESCO, 1980). More recently, the concept of communication rights has been mobilised in the context of the UN’s World Summit on the Information Society by the transnational Campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society (see Mueller, Kuerbis, & Pagé, 2007; Padovani & Pavan, 2009).

have their own specific issues and priorities, of the transversal character of communication and the need to make it a central part of their agenda (Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Stein, 2009). As Andreas Behn argues, this is essential to the project of building a communication movement, which does not have an obvious constituency in the way that other movements do:

We from the community radios believe that we are creating a social movement [concerned with] communication. This [movement] has a big problem, because all social movements have their base. MST has the landless workers, the homeless people's movement has the homeless people in the street [...]. The communication movement, who are its base? Journalists? They can't be, because journalists are people who earn relatively well in all societies. Our big problem is that we don't have a base. The base of the communication movement is all the social movements, because the fact of living without democratic communication affects all the social movements, and above all their bases. It is because of this that people don't have land, that people are poor, that we have corrupt governments, because there is a lack of democratic communication. For this reason we are in a process of communication, of putting pressure on social movements, telling them 'look, you are screwing it up if you don't invest more in communication' (interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).

Social forums provide important occasions for communication activists to construct links with other social movements and not only try to convince them through discourse of the importance of democratic communication but to demonstrate it in practice through the shared communication projects. By not simply claiming that another model of communication is possible, but demonstrating how – concretely – it can be done, shared communication activists hope that other movements also will come to appreciate the benefits of more democratic media systems and the need to join forces with the communication movement. They also hope that by involving WSF participants in the shared communication projects, this will help spread the concept and practice of shared communication to new actors in new locations:

The practice of shared communication [...], sharing with others, doing it in a collective manner, is something that is important not just for us to disseminate news about the Forum but [...] to strengthen, globally, a counter-

hegemonic communication, which gives space and voice to other groups, to other news, to other voices, that are excluded from the mass media. And we believe that from the moment a group comes to the Forum and enters into contact with this kind of process of knowledge production, they can take this idea with them beyond the Forum. Return home, and put into practice this exercise of collective knowledge production in the place where they do this on a daily basis, and this is interesting in terms of being able to expand networks and articulations for knowledge production (Bia Barbosa, interview, January 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>108</sup>

The shared communication projects, then, might be conceived as part of a broader process of promoting and strengthening this model of communication among WSF participants. By using social forums to engage in a prefigurative politics that demonstrates their model of democratic communication in practice, shared communication activists envisage the gradual proliferation around the world of their practices as new actors are exposed to them. An important objective therefore has been to establish links with movements and communicators in the locations where the WSF is held and involve them in producing their own media content.<sup>109</sup> This is closely linked to a conception of the WSF as a political process rather than just an event to be publicised through media coverage:

The Forum is not an event. If I go there, do my thing, and go home, and leave it at that, I will have treated the Forum as an event, I will have done communication as an event and this will not have contributed anything towards the social movements and organisations of the region where the Forum is held having more tools for communicating, with a new concept, a new perspective [...]. You can arrive at the Forum, do various videos, various audio-visuals, and various documentaries, or various reports, because you get there, and you know how to do it, and you have the equipment [...] and you are a friend of the movements. In this case, you will do communication *for* the social movements. Another thing is these movements doing their own communication (Rita Freire, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

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<sup>108</sup> Bia Barbosa is a Brazilian journalist based in São Paulo. She is a member of Intervezes and has been involved in the shared communication projects.

<sup>109</sup> Reflective of this aspiration, Rita Freire of Ciranda spent several months in Belém prior to the WSF 2009, working with local communication activists to mobilise for the shared communication projects. She played a key role in organising the Shared Communication Laboratory.

Extending the WSF public through shared communication, then, depends on mobilisation, movement-building, and the proliferation of alternative communication practices as much as on the circulation of media coverage. It involves a laborious process of constructing social relationships, involving new actors in the production of media content, and setting in motion dynamics in the places where the WSF is held. The exercise of engaging in the production of shared media coverage at social forums provides important occasions for participants to get to know each other and construct networks. Insofar as participants in shared communication also are part of other social movements, such networks bring together a plurality of knowledges and might facilitate convergence between them. In the following section, I consider how shared communication might be implicated in processes of knowledge production in the WSF.

### ***Affirming multiple truths, encouraging translation***

The commercial media wants to be the owner of the truth. Ciranda doesn't want to be the owner of the truth, but Ciranda knows that they are not exactly telling the truth and that there are a lot of other truths that they are not telling, and which we are going to tell. We want to change the world; they want to maintain the world the way it is (Fernanda Estima, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>110</sup>

What Boaventura [de Sousa Santos] proposes is that movements should have spaces of coexistence, in which they express themselves in their own manner, and are also provoked [...] to get to know one another. And I think that every time we think about doing this exercise of shared communication, every time we arrive [at a social forum] and say it's communication and it's an exchange [...] we have to sit down and converse with various interlocutors, and they need to sit down and converse with one another [...] in order to know how, together, they are going to carry out a media action in which these different interests coexist. So, this is a moment in which Boaventura's vision is put into practice (Rita Freire, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

As discussed in Chapter 1, the use of communication media by oppositional actors poses a fundamental challenge to media power,

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<sup>110</sup> Fernanda Estima is a Brazilian journalist and feminist activist based in São Paulo. She has participated in Ciranda since the second WSF.

as it contests both the truth-status of dominant versions of social reality and the idea of a single truth itself. By self-consciously taking the side of actors whose perspectives are routinely ignored or denigrated by mass media, alternative media deconstruct notions of objectivity and impartiality. This is also a key aspect of shared communication. Ciranda, in positioning itself clearly as on the side of disadvantaged groups, is an explicitly partisan initiative – but not in the sense of following a particular ‘party line’, as traditionally has been the case with many left-wing media. As the extract from the interview with Fernanda Estima quoted above illustrates, shared communication activists seek to make visible *many* truths, not one single truth. In the sense that it privileges the perspectives of historically marginalised actors while affirming the existence of multiple standpoints, shared communication demonstrates in practice the ‘new epistemologies’ discussed in Chapter 1.

The methodology developed by the TV Forum, particularly as implemented in 2005, provides a good example of this affirmation of epistemic plurality. Based on the principle that participants should be able to communicate on their own terms, there was no centrally coordinated agenda for what to cover: each group was free to produce videos focusing on any issue they wanted, in the format or genre of their choosing. These video pieces, each around three to five minutes long, were then put together to create the *Panorama Fórum* programme. As Adriano de Angelis explained, demonstrating the epistemic plurality of the WSF was a key objective of this exercise:

Even when a piece made by a commercial TV doesn't criticise the Forum, it for obvious reasons makes a choice. It chooses a point of view, a perspective on what is going to be said. The TV Forum [...] manages to put forward a multiplicity of visions, which would otherwise be difficult. And [participants'] own visions [...]. It is not me, as someone who has permission to say what that means, what happened, but the protagonist him/herself, the actor who was part of that experience, of that reality, who is going to communicate with society by means of their video (interview, January 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

By privileging the perspectives of ‘native reporters’ (Atton, 2002) who report from their position as participants in collective action, and enabling these reporters to communicate directly with a general public (‘society’), the TV Forum is conceived here as challenging the notion of a privileged ‘view from above’ – that of professional news reporters – which is central to media power.

Proponents of the shared communication are, however, not only concerned to express and affirm epistemic plurality. As Rita Freire suggests in the interview extract quoted at the beginning of this section, shared communication also might be seen as conducive to the process of translation envisaged by Santos (see Chapter 1). As discussed earlier, proponents of shared communication seek to involve members of other social movements in the production of shared media coverage (and to integrate them within a movement for the democratisation of communication). By providing spaces of sociality in which participants can exchange knowledge and experiences, identify differences and similarities, and arrive at a better understanding of each other’s ideas, the shared communication projects might facilitate convergence and articulation. As Fernanda Estima explained:

Putting the movements in contact with each other is another cool thing about Ciranda, because at the same time as we are there writing articles about women, there are also people from the black movement, people from the ecology movement, people [...] from the trade unions [...]. So, [Ciranda] puts these people... because, sometimes, [you might say] ‘ah, very well, there is movement A, B, C, D... no, I am sympathetic to all of them’. But what exactly is [that movement] saying? What is it proposing, what is it that it wants? So, I think that Ciranda also helps with this, to show the movement itself what others from the movement are doing (interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

By exposing participants to each other’s knowledges and practices, the shared communication projects can create what might be conceived as pedagogical spaces. As shown in Chapter 1, the WSF itself has been theorised in such terms, as potentially facilitating dialogic processes of learning. Central to such pedagogical visions of

the Forum is an emphasis on the transformative effects that encounters across difference can have. In the extract quoted below, Rita Freire offers an interesting example of how, concretely, such pedagogical processes can be facilitated by collaborative media production. She describes a workshop held prior to the WSF 2009 at the Shared Communication Laboratory. The workshop had brought together a diverse range of participants, including journalism students, local residents, and members of various movements and grassroots groups, with the aim of discussing how to organise the shared coverage in accordance with the WSF's objectives.<sup>111</sup>

We started to talk, and there was a debate [...] because the [list of objectives] begins with peace, with the question of a world of justice and peace etc.... and so [we had] a discussion about whether it might be better to just put the word peace, so that it would be better in editorial terms. There was a person who said, 'look, I don't think the word peace is good, because, really, we live in a world of conflict, and the idea of peace generates something that is passive'. And then the people started to discuss, because there were people with different visions. There were the girls from the church, who thought peace a beautiful word. There were [...] others who were from rural areas, for whom peace was something relative, because peace enforced by arms was not good. And so this discussion continued, and we did a workshop around this axis. And we arrived at the conclusion that the word peace was a good word [...] and that it was the interpretation of the word peace that was problematic because it suggested passivity in the face of order. And so, [the question was] how to work with content that would show peace. And this was the entire workshop (interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

In these examples, the production of media coverage of the WSF provides the occasion for encounters and translation, but it is not the media content *per se* that facilitates this. Although the circulation of such content within alternative media networks undoubtedly plays a significant role in introducing activists to the knowledges and practices of other movements, what stands out in these examples is the emphasis placed on the physical co-presence and face-to-face interactions that social forums make possible. This raises the

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<sup>111</sup> Each edition of the WSF is organised around a set of objectives or thematic axes, which summarise the substantive areas in which participating movements and organisations operate. The WSF 2009 had ten objectives (see World Social Forum, 2009b).

question of how the cross-fertilisation and mutual learning that shared communication facilitates *at* social forums may be extended beyond the events themselves. One answer is suggested by the prefigurative character of the shared communication projects: as shown earlier, activists envisage the gradual proliferation of collaborative communication practices as more people are exposed to the concept of shared communication and implement it in their own contexts. The emphasis that activists place on the construction of networks founded on ‘thick’ social relationships also provides a clue to how knowledge may ‘travel’ beyond the circulation of media content. Because shared communication activists tend also to be connected to particular social movements, they become important conduits of knowledge, bringing what they have learnt at the WSF back to their own constituencies. Though an important principle of shared communication is to enable movement activists to communicate their *own* ideas and proposals, Ciranda contributors do not only produce coverage about their own particular movement or organisation, but also about the activities of others. This may contribute to more indirect forms of learning, as knowledge is passed on through the interpersonal relationships that activists engage in on an everyday basis.

Speaking of the feminist movement, for example... to do coverage of the women’s movement, a [Ciranda contributor] from the World March of Women went to cover the feminist movements organised by AMB,<sup>112</sup> and she had to come and watch and tell... But she was not just a journalist, she was one of the activists, who when she returned, brought this reading, she brought this information about what that debate [...] was like, [the debate] of the other network. This situation happens all the time in Ciranda (Rita Freire, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

In other words, the particular kind of networked and socially grounded publics that shared communication activists seek to construct through movement-building may facilitate cross-fertilisation

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<sup>112</sup> *Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras* [literally, Articulation of Brazilian Women], a ‘rival’ feminist network to the World March of Women.

and contribute to articulation – not only through the circulation of media content but also through the relationships they construct and the knowledge they acquire in the process of producing such content. In contrast to the open space approach discussed in Chapter 4, the emphasis here is not so much on the provision of technical tools that enable WSF participants to interact and exchange (though this is clearly also important), as on building social relationships and mobilising people to communicate. Consequently, shared communication activists place great emphasis on *processes* of media production, seeking to make these as inclusive and collaborative as possible. As the following section will show, however, these ideals are not always easy to implement in practice, and the commitment to process is sometimes difficult to reconcile with other priorities.

### ***The difficult work of translation***

Shared coverage is not an automatic thing. It is very difficult to construct (Andreas Behn, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).

This chapter has established two main ways in which the WSF public may be extended through shared communication practices: through the circulation of media *content* (whether online or, in the case of the TV Forum, through public broadcasters) and through a movement-building approach that aims to involve new actors in the production of media content and construct networks based on thick solidarity. Insofar as it brings together activists from various social movements, this movement-building approach to extending the WSF public has the potential to facilitate translation and convergence between different knowledges within the WSF.

Constructing publics in this way is, however, far from straightforward. It depends on the capacity of the actors involved to build relations of solidarity and facilitate cooperation and exchange across various differences. As we have seen, activists place great

emphasis on the spaces of physical contiguity provided by the shared communication projects and the potential of such spaces to facilitate learning across difference and foster a sense of common purpose. However, practicing collaborative media production and constructing spaces that are truly dialogic and transformative in this sense require time, energy, and commitment. As one activist explained, 'it's a lot more work to make horizontal media than to make vertical media' (Andreas Behn, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).

This is true in any circumstances, but especially so when trying to integrate groups from different political, cultural, and geographical contexts who speak different languages and have different priorities. As we have seen, the concept and practice of shared communication originally was developed by Brazilian activists involved in the first Porto Alegre forums. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these activists have had more success in integrating actors at the national scale than globally. Regular face-to-face encounters, combined with shared language and culture, have contributed to creating a sense of collective identity and common purpose among Brazilian communication activists. At the same time, shared communication always has had a global ambition, not least in the sense that its proponents have sought to create spaces of sociality at the global editions of the WSF that involve actors from different parts of the world in collaborative media production. However, this is not always easy to realise in practice.

The Belém WSF provides examples of some of the challenges involved in practicing shared communication at the global scale. As outlined earlier, the projects brought together a range of actors – including local grassroots groups, experienced shared communication activists from elsewhere in Brazil, and various alternative media from other countries – with different trajectories, knowledges, and working practices. Members of the Communication Working Group for the WSF 2009 had negotiated an agreement by which they were given exclusive use of the FACOM building during

the WSF. FACOM was made a dedicated space for the shared communication projects – with computing facilities, studios for radio and audio-visual production, and a common meeting room – the intention being that this shared space would facilitate cooperation and exchange among the activists that converged there to produce coverage of the WSF. In some respects these objectives were achieved. The Shared Communication Laboratory that was organised prior to the forum succeeded in mobilising a variety of actors to participate in the shared coverage of the WSF and facilitated dialogue and exchange among participants. At the beginning of the forum, plenary meetings were held, in which participants discussed how to organise the space, and Ciranda organised conversations during the forum between communication activists and representatives of other social movements, including Palestinian organisations. However, some of the shared communication projects ended up not being quite as shared as many participants would have liked.

In the case of the Radio Forum, integration among participants was hindered by a combination of technical problems and the rather large gap in material resources, technical expertise, and connectedness that existed between local community radios on the one hand and participants in the transnational Radio Forum network on the other. While the latter were already connected as a network, used to working with web radio, and had experience from previous social forums, the local community radio activists often lacked basic material resources, broadcast via low-power FM transmission, and had limited internet access. At least partly because they were not accustomed to working with the internet, whether for web radio or transnational networking, it had proved difficult to involve the local radios in the preparations for the 2009 Radio Forum.

The space of physical co-presence provided in FACOM therefore became all the more important to establishing connections and integrating the local radios in the Radio Forum, which usually is a key aim for activists involved in the network. The two groups started out

working side by side in FACOM; the local radios transmitting live to the metropolitan area of Belém using an FM aerial mounted on the roof, and the international participants transmitting via web streaming. The two groups had held a couple of meetings immediately prior to the forum, during which they had begun to talk about how they could collaborate. The intention had been to share content and airtime; the local radio transmission would be connected to the web streaming when this was available, and some of the content made by international participants would be broadcast via the FM radio. The two groups also had begun to get to know one another and exchange knowledge and experience. Unfortunately, however, severe problems with the internet connection at FACOM thwarted their ambition of continued cooperation. On the third day of the forum, the international Radio Forum participants decided to move to the official media centre of the forum in order to be able to do their streaming. As Andreas Behn explained:

This had consequences which were not visible, but actually... tragic. We were no longer in the same space as the local radios and everybody else from the shared coverage. So, we managed to create a better product, our streaming worked better, we worked more quickly with less technical problems, but the idea of shared coverage didn't function, because of the lack of internet in FACOM (Andreas Behn, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

Despite good intentions, then, participants in the Radio Forum did not quite manage to construct the kind of collaborative working practices that they had wanted. This example illustrates, on the one hand, the difficulty of integrating place-based actors within transnational movement networks when they do not have the same capacity to make use of new communication technologies as their more connected counterparts.<sup>113</sup> The limited contact between the local

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<sup>113</sup> This is not to say that local community radio activists did not use the internet at all (the majority used email, for example); however few had regular internet access and it did not necessarily form part of their organising practices in the same way as it does for activists who are well-versed in transnational networking.

radios and the transnational Radio Forum network prior to the WSF meant that they had few other foundations on which to construct relationships than the space of physical contiguity provided at FACOM. When this co-presence was obstructed by technical problems, integration between the two groups was difficult to achieve. The Radio Forum also shows how the requirement to produce and transmit media coverage sometimes gets in the way of shared communication activists' commitment to participatory production processes. Although most would agree that the social relationships constructed in the process of producing media coverage are very important, the objective of reporting on the WSF is still what brings the majority of them there in the first place, and sometimes this is difficult to reconcile with the commitment to process.

This 'product versus process' problematic is particularly discernible in activists' attempts to practice the dual politics discussed earlier (simultaneously prefigurative and seeking to intervene in dominant publics), as the experience of the 2009 TV Forum demonstrates. As outlined earlier, the main groups involved were the Italian Focuspuller collective, local video activists connected to CEPEPO, and some experienced shared communication activists from elsewhere in Brazil. (In addition, participants included other Brazilian groups and some video producers from other countries.) To a significant extent, these groups had managed to establish links before the forum. Having spent considerable time in Belém prior to the event, the coordinator of Focuspuller had participated in the Communication Working Group and Shared Communication Laboratory, and introduced local activists to the WSF TV website. On the eve of the forum, the various groups involved held meetings to coordinate the TV Forum, and they started out working alongside one another sharing a room in the FACOM building.

By the second day of the forum, however, the TV Forum had split into two main groups: the Brazilian activists in one room and the Italians (with other 'internationals') in another. Nobody at the time

could explain exactly why this split had happened. Some mentioned language barriers, others hinted at personal differences, and someone thought it was because the Italians smoked and the Brazilians did not. One activist later explained that the air conditioning had broken, which prompted the Brazilians to move to a different room while the Italians stayed put, and once the forum had started it was too late to move back together.

Whatever the reason for the initial split, even if it was mainly due to a misunderstanding, the continued separation of the two groups was at least partly the result of their different priorities. For the Italians, who had made a commitment to upload daily highlights to the Eurovision feed, and whose coordinator had invested a lot of time and energy in trying to ensure they would have the technical infrastructure to do so, the main priority was to produce timely content of a professional quality. Inevitably, this meant they had less time and inclination to contribute to participatory media production. As one member of the collective explained (in an informal conversation), once the forum had started everybody was simply too busy to be able to sit down and share knowledge and experience with others. This does not mean the Italians saw the movement-building dimension of shared communication as unimportant; as the following interview extract suggests, it is perhaps more accurate to say they conceived it as necessarily separate from the objective of producing professional coverage for international media.

H: What is more important, the end product [...] or the process of making it?

A: They are two different things [...]. It is completely different. Because I can participate in a process but when I'm starting to produce, I have to send out stuff, I have to send it out. If I take it on as my duty to do that, I have to do it. It's not a joke, unfortunately, because you are putting your group, everything [on the line], because, ok, it's my personal role but if the Forum says we will do this, then it must be done in this way.

(Interview with Antonio Pacor, December 2008).

The Brazilian contingent, meanwhile, was made up primarily of grassroots groups, many of whom had little or no previous

experience of covering social forums. For them, the idea of experimentation, exchange, and mutual learning took on greater significance, and partly for this reason, partly because they lacked the necessary resources, they decided against producing a daily programme for public television as had been done on previous occasions. As in 2005, the TV Forum had been offered a daily slot by Brazilian public television for the *Panorama Fórum* programme. However, concerned that the obligation to produce a daily programme would draw attention away from the objective of experimenting with new practices, and not wanting to make promises they could not keep, the coordinators decided to decline the offer:

There was this opening if we produced an hour per day, they would show it. It was just that we didn't have the structure to produce one hour per day, and we had this discussion. This is already an achievement, like, great, we already have the offer, but we don't have the structure, and we don't want to be rushing to produce this one hour, because then you enter the logic of production. I mean, you will stop experimenting and you will not have time to learn about that reality and so on, because you have to fulfil an hour per day. And we also, there is the issue of commitment, of building trust, which is this, having won this space of one hour, we couldn't commit ourselves [and say] 'no, one hour is good', and then arrive with only ten minutes, half an hour, and then at another event when we needed this partnership, this opening, they wouldn't trust us (Thaís Brianezi, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>114</sup>

In short, while the Brazilian activists decided on this occasion (partly out of necessity) to privilege process, the Italians' priority was to produce high quality, timely content for international media. Consequently, the two groups ended up working in quite different ways. As one Italian participant opined (in an informal conversation), the two groups also seemed to operate with somewhat different understandings of what 'shared communication' actually entails. Whereas for the Brazilians it signified sharing equipment and skills and working collaboratively, the Italian collective understood it

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<sup>114</sup> Thaís Brianezi is a Brazilian communication activist, originally from Manaus. She is a member of Intervozes and was one of the coordinators of the 2009 TV Forum.

primarily in terms of sharing content and ideas, and were not in a position to share their equipment.

As these two brief examples illustrate, practicing shared communication at the global scale is challenging. The first case shows the difficulties of integrating localised actors within transnational networks without sustained face-to-face interaction; the second demonstrates the difficulties of working collaboratively when actors come from different political cultures and have different priorities and working practices. Both examples also illustrate how, despite good intentions, the imperative to produce high quality, timely media content is sometimes difficult to reconcile with participatory production processes. These difficulties do not, however, mean that the shared communication projects at the WSF 2009 should be considered a failure. Given that they have no formal organisational structure and resulted from the coming together of activists with very different perspectives and agendas, the fact that the projects took place and involved a number of new actors in shared communication practices is in itself an achievement. Moreover, translation across difference may happen through mistakes and conflict as much as through cooperation and dialogue (cf. Caruso, 2008). In this sense, the shared communication projects at the WSF 2009 are perhaps best conceived as part of an ongoing reflexive process of developing 'another communication' within the WSF.

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter has explored efforts by communication activists to develop a concept and practice of communication that is in keeping with the principles of the WSF and which challenges dominant media logics. Conceived by its proponents as a form of collective action in its own right, shared communication is not just a matter of 'publicising' the ideas and proposals of the movements that

participate in the WSF, but involves acting *with* such movements, contributing actively to mobilisation and knowledge production. Shared communication can contribute to extending the WSF public by facilitating the circulation of alternative media content, whether online or via public broadcasters, but also through a movement-building approach aimed at mobilising new actors to participate in communication and constructing relations of solidarity.

Insofar as it enables social movements to communicate on their own terms and present their own versions of social reality, shared communication can contribute to the epistemic project of the WSF. Its proponents take an explicitly partisan approach, which affirms the existence and validity of multiple (subalternised) knowledges and in this way challenges media power. By creating spaces of sociality in which participants can exchange knowledge and experience, shared communication can also facilitate pedagogical processes of translation. Such learning processes might extend beyond physical encounters at social forum events as knowledge travels through social movement networks via communication activists. However, as the examples from the Belém WSF illustrate, creating spaces for translation is not easy; it requires resources, time, and energy, which are often in short supply, and is sometimes difficult to reconcile with other priorities. While there are no easy solutions to this, some of the difficulties experienced in Belém might have been alleviated if more adequate technical infrastructures had been in place. Beyond this, it seems that more of a shared understanding of what 'shared communication' means for different actors would make it easier for activists with different agendas to work together.

The emphasis that many shared communication activists place on social relationships and enabling historically marginalised groups to communicate on their own terms adds a new dimension to questions about how the WSF public may be extended through communication practices. Highlighting the social foundation of publics, shared communication shows that this is not just a matter of

circulating media content more widely, but about enabling more actors to participate in the production of such content and constructing networks based on solidarity (which in turn may facilitate wider circulation of content). As the slogan ‘communicate to mobilise to communicate...’ suggests, shared communication activists see communication not as an external ‘service’ to disseminate the knowledges and practices of social movements to wider publics but as an integral part of movement dynamics.

How, and to what extent, might shared communication contribute to the construction of a global WSF public? As a concept and practice developed by a network of predominantly Brazilian activists, shared communication has in some respects retained a national orientation. This is evident in the efforts of some to disseminate media content via national broadcasters and in a strong sense of collective identity and common purpose among Brazilian shared communication activists, which it arguably has proved difficult to ‘scale up’. At the same time, shared communication since its inception also has been oriented towards the global. This is perhaps most evident in the way that Ciranda was conceived as a means to construct global communication networks online. However, shared communication is not only about ‘going global’ by circulating media content on the internet. Aware that technological infrastructures are a necessary but far from sufficient condition for constructing genuinely inclusive and dialogic publics, activists who subscribe to the movement-building approach also seek to extend the WSF public through more ‘subterranean’ processes to enable the proliferation of shared communication practices around the world. The following chapter considers an example of how this may happen by exploring the impetus that the WSF and the shared communication projects gave to the work of communication activists in Belém.

## 6. Starting from the Amazon: communication and the politics of place

*The Pan-Amazon will be the territory of the 9th edition of the World Social Forum. For six days, Belém, the capital of Pará, Brazil, takes the place of the center of the region to shelter the greatest anti-globalization event of today and brings together activists from more than 150 countries in a permanent process of mobilization, articulation and search for alternatives for another possible world, free of neoliberal politics and all forms of imperialism. [...]*

*Much more than a territory to shelter the WSF the Amazon, represented by its peoples, social movements and organizations, will be protagonist in the process and will have an opportunity to spread their struggle around the world, and make continental and global alliances (World Social Forum, 2009a: n. p.).*

*We yearn, we await with great joy the realization of the forum, because we understand that the forum is the moment of the people (Community radio activist from Belém, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).*

The decision to hold the WSF 2009 in Belém was motivated by a wish to ‘give voice’ to the peoples of the Pan-Amazon – a vast territory that spans nine countries<sup>115</sup> – and focus attention on the significance of the region to the world as a whole. Highly symbolic, the choice of the Amazon as a site for the WSF was intended as a way to put environmental issues on the agenda of global civil society. At the same time, organisers were eager to ensure that the region and its peoples should not simply form the ‘local’ backdrop to a ‘global’ meeting but play a leading role. This line of reasoning is in keeping with the more general sentiment, discussed in Chapter 1, that ‘place matters’ (Conway, 2004c, 2008d) in the WSF process, and that an important function of the WSF should be to set in motion dynamics and give visibility to actors and issues in the place where it is held. As

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<sup>115</sup> Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guyana, Guyana, Peru, Surinam, and Venezuela.

shown in the previous chapter, similar concerns also have been high on the agenda of activists who have sought to bring the concept and practice of shared communication to new actors and in this way extend the WSF public.

The politics of place, as discussed in Chapter 1, takes *place* – understood both as a particular geographical territory and people’s experience of and engagement with this territory – as its starting point. It involves place-making as a strategy for the defence of local cultures and ways of life, but cannot be reduced to mere resistance to global forces (Escobar, 2008). Many place-based actors seek simultaneously to defend local modes of life and engage in transnational network-building (Escobar, 2007a) and in this sense, the politics of place can be conceived as expressive of a place-based globalism (Osterweil, 2005) that challenges conventional understandings of globality as involving detachment from place.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the WSF has become a site for claims by place-based actors who have asserted their right to be present in the space of the Forum (Conway, 2004c, 2008d). This, however, has not been unproblematic: at several editions of the WSF the inclusion (or, more accurately, lack thereof) of the local resident population has been the subject of controversy, raising the question of exactly how ‘local’ or ‘global’ any given edition of the WSF should be (Conway, 2008d). By looking at how communication activists in Belém engaged with the WSF 2009, this chapter explores some of the complexities of the relationship between ‘local’ actors and the ‘global’ WSF process.<sup>116</sup> In some respects, the activists described in this chapter understood their relationship to the WSF in fairly

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<sup>116</sup> I use inverted commas here to emphasise the argument made in Chapter 1 that these are not neutral categories but designate a hierarchical relationship. How the categories of ‘local’ and ‘global’ are defined and who is included in each are questions of political and epistemological significance. Though at a basic empirical level it makes sense to describe activists based in Belém as ‘local’ in that they are from the local area, this does not mean they should not be considered part of the ‘global’ WSF process; conversely, activists who arrived in Belém from other parts of the world are not necessarily more ‘global’ than activist from Belém; they also come from *somewhere*.

conventional hierarchical terms, conceiving of the WSF as ‘global civil society’ arriving in Belém and themselves as ‘local’ actors wanting to ‘speak to the world’. However, activists also made innovative use of the WSF to construct a temporary place-based public that facilitated transnational connections and exchange, and to strengthen more long-term efforts to build what might be described as a regional counterpublic in the Pan-Amazon.

In what follows, I begin by considering briefly the role that community radios play in poor *bairros* [neighbourhoods] in Belém in order to demonstrate the centrality of place to activists’ practices and imaginaries. I then consider how community radio activists first encountered the WSF, showing how they initially conceived of their role as being to act as conductors for flows of information from the ‘local’ to the ‘global’ and vice versa. In the subsequent sections, however, I demonstrate how communication activists in Belém engaged with the WSF in ways that complicate hierarchical conceptions of scale. I look first at how community radio activists used the WSF as an occasion to set up a radio station which constituted a temporary public that was place-based but simultaneously provided the occasion for transnational connections. Second, I consider how the WSF was conceived as giving impetus to a longer-term project concerned with strengthening movement-based communication infrastructures in the Amazon.

What emerges from the analysis presented in this chapter is the way in which the politics of place is inextricably linked to the politics of communication for these activists. Their concern to construct publics in which movements and communities can elaborate and strengthen their own discourses and sense of identity underlines the importance of ‘local subalterns’ having their own public spheres in order to be able to engage in autonomous knowledge production. Far from insular, such publics may constitute the basis from which to engage with other actors and knowledges. By taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the arrival of the WSF in their city,

communication activists in Belém contributed to extending the WSF public ‘from below’, not simply by demanding inclusion but by seeking to create conditions for the elaboration and proliferation of knowledges and alternatives grounded in the realities and lived experience of people living in the Amazon.

### ***Constructing place-based publics: community radios in Belém***

We believe that we have to give our version, we have to have our medium to be able to give our version, and also to say what we think of theirs. It’s because of this we think we need to have a medium that belongs to the working people, that belongs to the people from this area, to show that they produce culture, that they dance, that they read... it’s important to say this, that they produce knowledge... This is, for us, the fundamental of our radios (Moisés Ferreira, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>117</sup>

The first group of actors discussed in this chapter belonged to a network of community radio stations from the metropolitan region of Belém and elsewhere in the Brazilian state of Pará. These were connected through the Forum in Defence of Community Radios (*Fórum em Defesa das Rádios Comunitárias*, or *Fórum de Rádios*, as it commonly was referred to by activists) – a body set up in October 2007 in collaboration with the Pará Society for the Defence of Human Rights (*Sociedade Paraense de Defesa dos Direitos Humanos*) to provide juridical support for community radio activists facing prosecution for unauthorised broadcasting. In addition to fulfilling this legal function, the *Fórum de Rádios* also constituted a reference point for an emerging movement for the democratisation of communication in Pará. In the period leading up to the WSF, the *Fórum de Rádios* held weekly meetings, in which not only community

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<sup>117</sup> Moisés Ferreira was at the time of my fieldwork part of *Rádio Resistência*, a community radio in Belém, and a member of the *Fórum de Rádios*. He is also a member of MST, the landless workers’ movement.

radio representatives but also other communication activists, including journalists, students, magazine editors, and video producers participated on various occasions. These meetings functioned alternately as occasions for information exchange about events organised by social movements in the city, political discussions about the communication movement and its aims, and preparations for participation in the WSF.

The radio activists who participated in the *Fórum de Rádios* consider themselves part of a social movement for the democratisation of communication. Fundamental to their struggles is the idea of communication as a human right, not just for the elites that currently control access to most means of communication, but for all citizens. The sense of urgency that informs their struggles can be appreciated, first, by considering the criminalisation that community radios suffer in Brazil. Obtaining a broadcasting license involves lengthy bureaucratic procedures, leaving community radios waiting years for their applications to be processed.<sup>118</sup> In the meantime, radios which broadcast without a licence face heavy penalties. Several activists told stories of raids carried out by the Brazilian Federal Police, during which equipment was confiscated and activists arrested; the impact of such raids could be devastating for radio stations which would have to spend months or even years getting the money together to purchase new equipment.

Second, activists' struggles for the democratisation of communication must be understood in the context of the lack of access that social movements and poor communities have to the public sphere in Brazil. Known for its high concentration of media ownership, the Brazilian media landscape is dominated by commercial interests, with a handful of private networks dominating the market (Wimmer & Penna Pieranti, 2008). The closedness of the national

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<sup>118</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, one community radio in Belém had waited thirteen years and counting to be granted a broadcasting licence, another ten years. Only one of the radios involved in the *Fórum de Rádios* had obtained a licence.

public sphere is deeply felt by community radio activists, for whom the democratisation of communication is not just an abstract principle but inextricably bound up with notions of dignity, identity, and individual and collective self-worth. In a country where the affluent middle class and poor majority live in almost completely separate worlds, being excluded from the public sphere is not only a matter of being unable to express your opinions or not having your interests represented in public debates. For the activists I met, it also means that poor communities are prevented from expressing and comprehending their own realities in their own terms. Their exclusion from the public sphere operates at an experiential and epistemic level, in the sense that poor communities do not see their realities reflected or valorised in mass media, and are thereby deprived of cognitive material with which to make sense of their lived experience. In interviews I carried out with community radio activists, the alienating character of conventional media was a recurring theme. This was partly conceived in terms of the alienating effects of capitalism and consumerism; commercial media were perceived as propagating a culture based on consumption, which marginalises and devalues poor populations with little purchasing power. Activists also expressed deep frustration at the way in which their communities are misrepresented and denigrated in the local media as lawless, no-go areas devoid of culture.

In the face of repression, exclusion, and denigration, activists feel a strong need to provide channels for these communities to express themselves and for their identities and culture to be valorised. Having their own means of communication is fundamental to this. As Moisés Ferreira suggests in the interview extract quoted above, the role of community radios can be conceived in terms of providing a counterpoint to dominant discourses, a sphere in which alternative interpretations of reality, as seen from the perspectives of poor and marginalised people, can be elaborated and disseminated. The role of community radios is not, however, confined to the

production and dissemination of counter-discourses. They also function as convergence points around which the social and cultural life of communities is organised. Taking a holistic approach to what they see as education for social transformation, activists organise educational projects for young people, run community libraries, and give practical courses in radio production, to give a few examples. Underlying these projects is a concern with empowerment and capacity-building, conceptualised at the level of the individual as well as the collective. In this sense, they are much more than just radios, as one activist explained:

Radio, the term 'radio' we don't use. At [our radio] we use *comunitária*,<sup>119</sup> only *comunitária*, because [...] we think it is not just a radio. There are other means, for example, starting from the radio, we set up our library, started to incentivise people to read... We are trying, with a lot of struggle, to set up a *telecentro*<sup>120</sup> [...] or develop other activities which are not just radio [...]. For us it is the *comunitária*, the idea is to do other things with the community, not just talk. What differentiates us from other radios is this. The others are just radios, we don't want to be just radios. As our goal is to transform society, just talking won't do, there will have to be other gestures. You have to have the people talking, have the people reading, have the people using other technologies (Moisés Ferreira, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).

Embedded in particular localities through their engagement with resident populations, community radios can be seen as constituting *place-based publics* – communicative spheres that are both grounded in and contribute to the construction of meaning about a particular place. From offering opportunities for social movements to talk about their ideas to training young people in radio production and organising cultural events in the *bairro*, the practices of community radio activists can be understood as geared towards the creation of a public sphere in which alternative interpretations of reality, grounded

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<sup>119</sup> *Comunitária* is the adjective designating a radio as a community radio, as in *rádio comunitária*. There is no direct equivalent in English that encapsulates its full meaning ('communitarian' has a different ring); in this particular context the most appropriate translation is probably 'of and for the community'.

<sup>120</sup> A *telecentro* is a public facility where people can use computers, access the internet and use other digital technologies.

in the lived experience of local residents, can be not just disseminated but constructed.

The practices and reflections of community radio activists illustrate the importance of place as an anchor for the production of oppositional knowledges. This is not to say that such knowledges simply emerge *from* particular places. Importantly, the production of place-based knowledge goes hand in hand with *place-making*, based on the affirmation of local culture and elaboration of shared understandings of what a particular *bairro* is like. The place-making strategies of community radio activists can be seen as concerned with the opening up of an epistemic space, embedded in a particular socio-historical and geopolitical location, for the production of place-based knowledge: knowledge that is constructed *in* and begins *from* a particular place. These strategies are informed by activists' experience of place-based struggles and their ethical-political commitment to the well-being of their communities. This kind of investment in place was central to the way in which these and other communication activists in Belém conceptualised and engaged with the WSF.

### ***Encountering the WSF***

Since they started hearing talk about the WSF, people had this yearning, this will, the social movements were anxious to participate, to be able to give their cry for freedom. So from then on, everybody created this atmosphere around the WSF, that atmosphere of power, that atmosphere of dynamism, of people being able to shout. So, 'are we going to be able to divulge? Are we going to be able to shout? Are we going to be able to realise our desire?' (Raimundo Oliveira Oliveira, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>121</sup>

When I began my fieldwork in Belém in November 2008, two and a half months before the start of the WSF, the atmosphere among

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<sup>121</sup> Raimundo Oliveira Oliveira is a community radio activist in Belém. He was a member of the *Fórum de Rádios* and played a key role in its preparations for the WSF.

activists was one of excitement and anticipation, combined with a slight feeling of uncertainty. There was a clear sense of the historical significance of the WSF coming to Belém, of it representing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But for what? What exactly was the World Social Forum? What was going to happen? Among the communication activists I worked with, there was a flurry of activity, with meetings of one sort or another taking place constantly to discuss how to participate in the forum, how best to take advantage of it, and what it would mean for local movements and their struggles. For many, the WSF 2009 was going to be their first social forum and expectations were high.

At this stage, community radio activists conceived of their task vis-à-vis the WSF as twofold. One set of strategies focused on the need to inform local residents about the Forum. There was a widespread sense that the general population of Belém and surrounding areas either lacked information about the WSF or was misinformed about its character and purpose. As highlighted in Chapter 3, the local media tended to frame the WSF as a tourist event or conference organised by the state government of Pará, which resulted in confusion about its actual character. Motivated by their strong commitment to their local communities, community radio activists therefore saw it as a key priority to inform their listeners about the character of the WSF and about the issues being discussed there, in this way providing a much-needed counterpoint to the dominant media.

The main objective is this, that all this information reaches this long-suffering population here, so that they can understand this process [...]. Because their minds are so alienated, from other media, from television, that they don't know, they don't know what a World Social Forum is, they don't know this. So our principal objective is this, to bring information about the things that will be happening at the forum to the peripheries (Member of the *Fórum de Rádios*, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).

The second set of strategies revolved around using the WSF to make visible local and regional realities and struggles. As Raimundo

Oliveira Oliveira suggests in the interview extract quoted at the beginning of this section, there was a widespread sense that the WSF provided a unique opportunity for communities and movements in Belém and the Amazon as a whole 'to speak to the world'. Consequently, community radio activists understood their role as being to give voice to social movements and make visible local and regional issues. When asked about the coverage they intended to produce in relation to the WSF, activists emphasised the importance of showing the realities of people living in Belém, in the state of Pará, and in the Amazon as a whole. For one woman, this was a matter of showing the culture and ways of life of the local population:

Interviewee: [I want to] divulge our culture, our music, to talk about our city, to show, because there are going to be a lot of people from elsewhere participating... show what Belém is like, how it is that the people of Belém live, talk about the sights of Belém, talk about our customs, show our community, how it lives, this is very important.

Hilde: Why is this important?

Interviewee: It's important because [...] we are going to be with various people from various countries, so there are people who don't know, who don't know Belém. Even in Rio de Janeiro there are people who don't know, when someone from Pará arrives there, sometimes people ask 'what country are you from?' So, here inside... we don't know ourselves, you know? So we need to know, need to show who we are, what we do, where we are.

(Interview with a member of the *Fórum de Rádios*, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese)

While some emphasised the importance of making visible and valorising local identities and cultures, others stressed the need to show the realities of the hardship that the local population suffers. This was often placed in the context of what many activists saw as attempts by the local media and government authorities to present an overly positive image of the city to WSF participants. As one activist explained when asked what kind of issues he would like to show,

I think it won't do to sugar coat things. You have to show the reality of the country, that there is misery, poverty, hunger, prejudice, violence, and this we have to show. And so the Forum, hosted here in Belém, is a good moment to

be denouncing the indifference of our appointed authorities (Chico Canuto, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>122</sup>

As well as wanting to give visibility to the struggles of the movements and communities they work with, the WSF also presented a unique opportunity for community radio activists to call attention to their own difficulties. In particular, the importance of denouncing the repression suffered by community radios was continually affirmed, and the question of how best to do this constituted a central topic of discussion during weekly meetings of the *Fórum de Rádios*. Expressions like the following were commonplace:

I intend to participate in the WSF and make an effort, together with some *companheiros*, to denounce the repression suffered by community radios in Brazil. We want to denounce to the people and entities who are participating, principally international entities, we want to denounce to these entities the repression suffered since the Lula government [came into power], we want to say to the world that the enemy number one of community radios in Brazil is Lula, and we want these peoples of the world, who are going to be part of the WSF, to put international pressure on the government so that it stops this repression against the Brazilian people. We are making a big effort in this respect and we hope to gain some result from the solidarity of these entities and these peoples of the world who come to participate in the WSF (Member of the *Fórum de Rádios*, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).

Left at this, it would seem that community radio activists in Belém conceived of their task primarily in terms of acting as conductors for vertical flows of information between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’: on the one hand, to distribute knowledge about the WSF ‘downwards’ to the local population, and, on the other, to disseminate knowledge about local or regional conditions ‘upwards’ to the WSF, conceptualised here as a manifestation of global civil society. But is this all there is to their motivations and practices? The problem with such an analysis is that it makes it difficult to understand the attempts of community radio activists to produce and disseminate

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<sup>122</sup> Chico Canuto was at the time of my fieldwork a resident of Terra Firme, one of the poorest *bairros* in Belém, and director of programming at the neighbourhood’s *Rádio Cidadania* [Radio Citizenship].

place-based knowledges as anything more than a cry for help from disempowered 'local' actors. It leads to a conceptualisation of their practices simply in terms of resistance to dominant meanings, and denies them the possibility of positive agency, of being able to construct alternatives. Moreover, a conception of these communication practices simply in terms of transmission from the local to the global and vice versa relies on a hierarchical conception of scale which privileges the global over the local and fails to account for the variety of scales on which activists operate and the creativity they deploy in doing so. As discussed in Chapter 1, the struggles of social movements can be embedded in particular localities and at the same time form part of global networks, thereby challenging conventional 'nested' understandings of scale (Sassen, 2006). Though to a certain extent hierarchical conceptions of scale were discernible in some activists' understanding of the WSF and their relation to it, especially before they had worked out fully the nature and extent of their participation, their practices and the ways in which they imagine scale go beyond simple notions of 'local' appeals to 'global' civil society. In the next section, I discuss how community radio activists made use of the WSF to create a temporary public sphere – through an FM radio station that broadcast from the forum site – which enabled them to elaborate place-based knowledges while simultaneously facilitating transnational connections and exchange.

### ***Temporary openings: the Rádio dos Povos***

I think that for the WSF, the radio served as an exchange between the people who were there from other countries with our population here in Belém. Why? Because [...] from the moment they were using our microphones, they were passing on to other people what they were thinking, not just about the WSF, but also about the capital Belém. And the people who were there [listening] ended up sharing what the person was transmitting [...] through the interactivity that the public had with the interviewee (Member of the *Fórum de Rádios* who participated in the *Rádio dos Povos*, interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

As shown in the previous chapter, the WSF 2009 provided the occasion for a set of shared communication projects which aimed to bring together alternative media activists and communicators from different parts of the world. Housed at the Faculty of Communication (FACOM) at the Federal University of Pará, these projects were intended as spaces for collaboration and exchange, involving participants in the production of shared media coverage and in the process facilitating network-building. As we saw, this involved a sometimes difficult exercise in translation between actors from different geographical, political, and cultural contexts, who had different priorities. In the case of the Radio Forum, it proved difficult to achieve the level of integration that participants had wanted between local community radios and groups that already formed part of the transnational Radio Forum network.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, activists involved in the *Fórum de Rádios* appropriated the space made available to them at FACOM and managed to set up an FM radio station – dubbed *Rádio dos Povos* [The Peoples' Radio] – which broadcast live for the duration of the forum. Coordinated by representatives from four local community radios who were responsible for technical infrastructure and management of the programme schedule, the *Rádio dos Povos* was live on air from early morning until around 9pm every day, and around ten community radios (mainly from Pará but also from elsewhere in Brazil) participated, dividing available air time between them. With equipment belonging to one local station, including a 250w transmitter and an antenna temporarily mounted on the roof of FACOM, the *Rádio dos Povos*, according to organisers, reached most of the metropolitan region of Belém and some neighbouring areas.

At a basic level, the *Rádio dos Povos* functioned to raise awareness about the WSF among the local population. As one of its organisers explained:

Our concern was to be passing information about the Forum to people who were not here in Belém following the forum, so that they could have a sense,

the listener could have a sense of the programme, of what was happening, of the debates that were taking place at the Forum (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

Seeking to bring the WSF to their local communities, activists went to workshops and seminars, listened to speeches and debates to find out about the themes being discussed, and got hold of representatives from various movements who they then brought back to the studio to be interviewed. As well as acting as the eyes and ears of their listeners, activists also conceived of their role in terms of 'giving voice' to WSF participants. What they wanted to achieve through the *Rádio dos Povos* was, in the words of the same organiser,

to be able give voice to all the segments present at the forum. Whoever wanted to go there to talk about or debate any subject, that we could put issues on the agenda and debate them, without discriminating against anyone [...], that delegates from whatever country, whatever state, could have access to the means of communication. Because of this we named it *Rádio dos Povos*, because this was what best identified... the identity of the radio was of this amplitude, of this democratic opening, that any segment could arrive there, could have their space and speak, give their interview, give their testimony, pass on their experience (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

In bringing the voices of the WSF to its listeners, an important function of the *Rádio dos Povos* was to provide a counterpoint to the distorted image of the Forum that activists found in the local media, thereby helping the local population to understand better its objectives and significance. However, the radio was not only about one-way dissemination *from* the WSF *to* the listeners. Emphasising the interactive character of their programmes, activists conceived of the radio not just as a means to inform listeners about the forum, but as a means for them to participate. As was everyday practice in their own radios, activists opened up telephone lines for listeners to interact with presenters and interviewees in the studio. Describing the target audience of the radio as those who were excluded from the forum because of the R\$30 (around £10) entrance fee, one participant conceived the *Rádio dos Povos* as

the entrance ticket that enabled these people to participate. People who were on the outside, when they had some issue they were interested in, they called and spoke live on air, via telephone, directly on air, on the radio, and debated the issue with us (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

As well as bringing the WSF to the local population, then, the radio also brought the local population, most of which would otherwise have been excluded, to the WSF. By enabling this kind of two-way communication, the radio provided opportunities not just for information dissemination but also for debate about the issues being discussed at the Forum.

At one level, by facilitating interchange between listeners and WSF participants, the *Rádio dos Povos* served to extend the public sphere of the WSF to include local residents who could not be physically present. In such a reading, which fits within a conventional understanding of publics, the radio is exemplary of the way in which mediated communication can extend a given public sphere across space and thereby enable interaction at a distance. In this way, the radio might be conceived as having provided a link between the 'local' and the 'global', enabling listeners to share in the intercultural learning and exchange of experience for which the WSF is celebrated. Put differently, the *Rádio dos Povos* might be understood as the means through which the local population was able to participate in the deliberations of the global public gathered at the WSF.

There is, however, more to the public constituted by the radio than inclusion. If we accept Barnett's (2003) insight, outlined in Chapter 1, that mediated publics are not simply the transparent representation or extension of pre-existing social subjects across time and/or space, but in important ways are constituted in and through acts of representation, a different understanding becomes possible. Our concern is now not only with the connections between 'local' and 'global' publics made possible by the radio, but with the kind of public that it *brought into being*.

From this perspective, the *Rádio dos Povos* can be interpreted as constituting a temporary place-based public, which also, and *by virtue of it being place-based*, functioned as a node for transnational connections. This can be elaborated with reference (1) to its geographical dimension, and (2) to what might be referred to as its knowledge dimension. First, the public constituted by the *Rádio dos Povos* was place-based in the sense that it operated from a particular location and covered a distinct geographical territory. The public imagined by activists was people living within the metropolitan region of Belém, and their aim was to enable this population to participate in the WSF. Importantly, the *Rádio dos Povos* was informed by the same key principles as the community radios: a concern with encouraging direct participation and an ethical-political commitment to the empowerment of local communities grounded in long-standing engagement with and awareness of their lived experience.

Second, and following on from this last point, the *Rádio dos Povos* might be characterised as a place-based public operating as a point of convergence on the basis of, to use Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) term, the 'knowledge interests' that were articulated through it. According to the coordinators, the radio examined and debated a wide range of themes, from human rights to hydro-electric dam projects; land reform to the struggles of the women's and black people's movements; urban reform to climate change. Indeed, in keeping with the principle of openness discussed above, the radio's agenda was very flexible, with themes 'being broached as people arrived to be interviewed', as one participant put it (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese). Nevertheless, it is possible to detect a common thread. As one organiser explained, when asked whether activists from her radio had followed any particular criteria when choosing what themes to cover, 'the criteria that we chose were like this: verify the most visible themes within the forum that had to do with the Amazon region' (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese). While not always articulated

as explicitly by other participants, a connection to the Amazon is present in the majority of themes which were examined by the *Rádio dos Povos*. From 'local' issues such as community radio activists' own struggles against repression to 'global' issues such as climate change, topics were either related directly to the Amazon or discussed with reference to their relevance for, and impact on, people living in the region. When deciding on how to organise their coverage, activists tended to choose topics on the basis of their engagement with, and investment in, the Amazon as a particular place.

As in the case of local community radios, this production of knowledge about the Amazon as a region also involved place-making. As one organiser explained, when talking about the contribution that the *Rádio dos Povos* made to the local population,

I think it contributed to disseminating the significance of the WSF, what it represents for society. What the importance of this movement is, principally here in the Amazon region. Say to the population what it means to be Amazonian. People are in Belém and didn't know that they were from the Amazon region. Belém is inside the Amazon region and we have a responsibility to debate the problems that are inherent in the Amazon region (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

Raising awareness among Belém's urban population about the problems that the Amazon faces and the struggles of movements in the region – enabling them to 'see the reality of the Amazon region, in depth' in the words of the same person (my translation) – also had as an aim to make this population identify as part of the Amazon. As hinted at in the interview extract quoted above, a sense of belonging to the Amazon – a region that is perhaps most commonly understood as a vast and sparsely populated rainforest – is not necessarily obvious to residents of Belém, a metropolis of around 1.4 million inhabitants (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2010). Generating a sense of connection to the Amazon among this urban population, by linking the struggles of poor communities in Belém to those of rural populations and movements elsewhere in the region, was therefore a key task for the *Rádio dos Povos*. The kind of identity

construction at play here might be understood as based on the production of discourses that define the Amazon as a place. This construction of place might be described, on the one hand, as based on linking the local urban population to the region as a whole; on the other, it was concerned with facilitating a better understanding of the geopolitical location of the Amazon vis-à-vis the world, particularly in relation to its implication in the projects of global capital.

While aimed principally at the people of Belém, the public created through the *Rádio dos Povos* was not place-bound, confining the circulation of knowledge and ideas to a particular geographical location. Rather, activists' concern to facilitate the production of knowledge *in, about, and for* the Amazon provided the occasion for connections to be made with other actors and their knowledges, as radio activists brought WSF participants from other localities into the studio in order to bring their experience of similar struggles to bear on issues pertaining to the Amazon, and in turn shared their own experiences. In this way, while grounded in a particular locality and focused on place-based issues, the *Rádio dos Povos* functioned simultaneously as a convergence point for actors from different localities and as a sphere for translation between different knowledges.

The experience of the *Rádio dos Povos* shows how the WSF provided not only an opportunity for activists to 'speak to the world' but an occasion for a collective project of knowledge production involving actors from different locations. Whereas the role that community radios play within their local communities might be conceived in terms of the first of what Escobar (2008: 32) describes as two 'subaltern strategies of localization', namely 'place-based strategies that rely on the attachment to territory and culture', the *Rádio dos Povos* fits within the second: 'network strategies that enable social movements to enact a politics of scale from below' (Escobar, 2008: 32). Although activists were motivated by a concern to better understand a particular place, their participation in the radio

also enabled them to arrive at a better understanding of their place in global networks. While they might initially have conceived of their position vis-à-vis the WSF in hierarchical terms, as the ‘local’ counterpart to ‘global’ civil society arriving in their city, the experience of the *Rádio dos Povos* facilitated a conceptualisation among community radio activists of themselves and the Amazon as connected to other actors and places through transnational networks.

Having considered the way in which the WSF prompted the opening up, for a delimited period of time, of a place-based public for transnational connections in the form of the *Rádio dos Povos*, the following section examines longer-term efforts by communication activists to construct a regional Amazon public, and the difference the WSF made to this project.

### ***Longer-term strategies: constructing a regional counterpublic in the Pan-Amazon***

This was fundamental for us, the Laboratory and the [...] forum, which served for us to show the work of the organisation and strengthen the groups that work with us, that always worked with us, which are young people, social movements, women, university students [...]. So for us, the event served to further strengthen this will to continue a process of participatory communication here in the Amazon (Ilma Bittencourt, interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>123</sup>

The second group of actors discussed in this chapter are activists involved in the work of CEPEPO, an NGO based in Belém that worked with communication as a tool for popular education.<sup>124</sup> Inspired by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire, CEPEPO was founded in 1980 to support urban movements in Belém, using photography and film as

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<sup>123</sup> Ilma Bittencourt was at the time of my fieldwork the director of CEPEPO. She was one of the coordinators of the Communication Working Group for the WSF 2009.

<sup>124</sup> The organisation’s full name was originally Centre for the Study and Practice of Popular Education (*Centro de Estudos e Práticas de Educação Popular*); this was changed after the WSF 2009 to Centre for Communication and Popular Education (*Centro de Comunicação e Educação Popular*).

pedagogical tools to help poor communities reflect on and better understand their realities and struggles. The organisation had since continued working with communities and movements on a range of issues, and described itself as ‘an NGO that works with and for social movements, to strengthen and document their struggles, using audio-visual tools, giving workshops in this area, producing documentaries and institutional films’ (CEPEPO, n.d., my translation from Portuguese). Founded on a vision of the transformative effects of participatory communication, CEPEPO had a long history of working with urban communities in Belém, running projects with the aim of contributing to individual and collective empowerment. At the time of my fieldwork, the organisation’s premises – which provided meeting rooms, film equipment, editing facilities, and a small library – were located in the *bairro* of Guamá. Home to the campus of the Federal University of Pará, which hosted the WSF, Guamá is one of most deprived areas of Belém but also has a diverse cultural and political life, and CEPEPO was strongly embedded in the local community.

In addition to this local orientation, the organisation also conceived of its ambit as including the rest of the state of Pará as well as the Pan-Amazon region as a whole. Activists involved in the organisation had a strong conception of their city and neighbourhoods as part of the Amazon, and this regional identification seemed to be more pertinent to their work than a sense of national identity. Much of CEPEPO’s work was focused on thematic areas relating to the Amazon, including deforestation, agriculture, and development projects, and the organisation had been involved in various projects with rural communities in the region.

The organisation’s work could be characterised as having a dual focus: on the one hand, to document and make visible the realities and struggles of people living in Belém and the Amazon, and on the other, through capacity-building, to enable movements and communities to appropriate communication technologies for their

own purposes. Having started out with the aim of using communication as a tool for education, CEPEPO increasingly had come to focus on communication as a theme in its own right, and to see its own role as being to promote the issue of communication among organisations and social movements, in Belém and in the Amazon as a whole.

Today, CEPEPO wants to assume, wants to be this organisation where this discussion takes place, which brings this debate to all the social movements, the NGOs, this question of communication as a human right (Ilma Bittencourt, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).

This was motivated by a strong sense of communication being a major challenge for movements and organisations in the region, partly due to problems of geographical distance and poorly developed communication infrastructures, and partly due to a lack of resources and capacity. Combined with the lack of space available to them in conventional media, the result is that social movements in the Amazon have very limited opportunities to communicate their ideas and proposals, both externally to general publics, and internally among themselves. A key aim for CEPEPO was therefore to strengthen movement-based communication infrastructures in the Amazon, through capacity building, awareness-raising, and network construction.

The arrival in Belém of the WSF was greeted as an important opportunity to strengthen this project. This was conceived in terms of learning from the experiences of communication activists from elsewhere in Brazil and other countries.

The forum is going to be this great moment, where there will be other organisations which already have managed to work a bit with [communication], where we can be seeing, participating in this laboratory, learning, and trying to implement this afterwards here in our region, in the Amazon (Ilma Bittencourt, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).

As shown in the previous chapter, CEPEPO played a key role in the organisation of the shared communication projects at the WSF 2009, hosting the Shared Communication Laboratory prior to the forum and participating in the TV Forum during the event itself. CEPEPO's capacity to assume this central role was strengthened through its partnership with Ciranda, whose coordinator Rita Freire had spent several months in Belém prior to the WSF to help mobilise for the shared communication projects. In the weeks leading up to the forum, a series of workshops were hosted by CEPEPO, during which participants (who included local residents, members of different movements, and students from UFPA) gained practical skills in journalism, radio, and audio-visual production, started producing coverage of themes relating to the WSF, and made plans for the shared coverage of the event itself. As a result of these workshops, activists connected to CEPEPO were well prepared for the WSF, having learnt practical skills, established links with various actors, and – perhaps most importantly – gained confidence in their abilities as communicators.

As well as offering the possibility to learn new skills and practices, the WSF – a rare occasion for organisations and movements in the Pan-Amazon that are normally separated by vast distances to come together – was seen as an important opportunity for CEPEPO to develop relationships with regional actors and demonstrate the importance of communication to them.

[The forum is an opportunity] not just to be constructing this proposal for the shared communication projects. CEPEPO is also developing a relationship with organisations here from the Amazon and here from Belém, in the sense of strengthening communication as a right. I think the forum gave us this possibility as well. For this reason CEPEPO said, 'let's join, since we already want to work on the politics of information and think that communication is fundamental in order to transform society, let's join the Communication Working Group, and let's try to construct this in the most participatory way possible, and try to use this moment to tell people that communication is important for social movements' (Ilma Bittencourt, interview, December 2008, my translation from Portuguese).

In the period leading up to the WSF, activists involved in the Shared Communication Laboratory invited representatives from a range of movements – including MST, Via Campesina, indigenous groups, the women’s and black people’s movements – to discuss how their issues could be incorporated into the coverage produced by the shared communication projects. As Ilma Bittencourt explained, this was conceived primarily in terms of putting issues relating to the Amazon on the agenda:

[Our idea was] first to discuss these issues, for [the movements] to bring these major themes relating to the Amazon question, and also themes related to the questions that are asked in the world as a whole, but I think more specifically Amazonian issues, and from there to put some issues on the agenda and for these to be incorporated into the issue of written, radiophonic, and audio-visual communication (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

Insofar as it brought together activists from different movements and enabled them to share their knowledge of issues relating to the Amazon, the Shared Communication Laboratory can be conceived as an attempt to create a space for translation and collective knowledge production which was oriented specifically towards the Amazon. Drawing on the organisation’s history of working with regional actors and issues, CEPEPO activists put the Amazon, and its peoples and their struggles, at the centre of their engagement with the WSF.

This commitment to the Amazon was also prominent in the way they approached the task of reporting on the WSF:

V: We decided here at CEPEPO that we were going to put this on the agenda, the Amazon, themes related to the Amazon, and where there were activities at the forum that had to do with the Amazon, we had to be there, covering, getting interviews, collecting material, these things.

H: Why was it important for you to cover this?

V: The Pan-Amazon is important for us because we are in the Amazon, right? And we who live here, we feel strongly this devastation, this felling of trees, the climate... all of this we feel very strongly. So, the question of preserving our environment, the Amazon, is very important for us, and it is the work that CEPEPO already does. (Interview with Vanessa Silva, February 2009, my

translation from Portuguese)<sup>125</sup>

The WSF, in brief, was seen as an opportunity to give voice to movements in the Pan-Amazon and make their struggles and alternatives visible. Of particular significance to CEPEPO activists was the discovery of the various platforms that existed for disseminating their content online, such as the WSF TV and Ciranda websites. According to Ilma Bittencourt, CEPEPO activists previously had circulated their material only by distributing DVDs, primarily within Belém. However,

from the experience of the [Shared Communication] Laboratory, we understood that we could share our experience with other places in Brazil and in the world, and to where we could link what was being produced, which was WSF TV, we discovered how we could upload videos there... (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

This sense of being able to connect to the global – the idea that their work could be disseminated via online platforms that are in principle accessible to anyone anywhere in the world – was a great source of motivation and confidence for CEPEPO activists. As Ilma Bittencourt explained:

We went to the forum with a much higher self-esteem, in the sense that [we knew] we could produce good quality material and disseminate this material to various places in the world, in Brazil, and in the Amazon (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

However, as hinted at in the extract above, engaging with a global public was not their only – or even primary – concern. Given the difficulties that social movements and organisations in the Amazon have in communicating, circulating media coverage within a regional public was considered just as, or even more, important:

First, I think [our audience is] Belém and the Amazon, first [...]. It's a very big complaint among the social movements that we don't see ourselves, we don't

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<sup>125</sup> Vanessa Silva is from Guamá and was at the time of my fieldwork a volunteer at CEPEPO. She has since become an active contributor to Ciranda.

communicate what we are doing, neither to ourselves nor to civil society [...]. I think first here, because sometimes it is much easier to have information about the Amazon there in Hilde's country, there in São Paulo... but we don't have this information here for society to know (Ilma Bittencourt, interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

By producing coverage of themes relating to the Amazon, CEPEPO activists were seeking not only to disseminate knowledge about the Amazon to a somehow external 'global public'. Their work to strengthen movement-based communication in the Amazon was not simply about enabling these movements to get a message across; it was also, crucially, about creating a public sphere in which these movements could elaborate what that message *is*. In this sense, these activists' efforts to strengthen movement-based communication in the Amazon might be conceived as a project aimed at constructing a regional counterpublic; through the dissemination of media content relating to the Amazon and through a movement-building approach that sought to involve regional actors in the production of such media content.

One of the key aims of constructing such a public was, then, to create conditions for production of knowledge in, about, and for the Amazon, starting from the realities of people living in the region. This project went hand-in-hand with *place-making*. The production of knowledge starting from the Pan-Amazon, a region that comprises nine countries and covers a vast territory, also involves significant work to define what the Amazon *is*. During an interview in which we discussed the significance of knowledge produced by social movements, Ilma Bittencourt offered the following thoughts on the issue of knowledge production in the Amazon:

Here in the Amazon, it is a struggle which I think is very related to identity, which is thought of in the sense of constructing a knowledge for the communities, for the originary peoples from here, which is ours, constructed through our own relationships here. That at least here in the Amazon, we perceive that today, the movements, they understand better this process of constructing knowledge, from here, from our roots, from our identity, and which doesn't come from above, as you said, which causes problems. You don't manage to develop, you don't construct identity (interview, February

2009, my translation from Portuguese).

The efforts by communication activists to construct an Amazon identity can be situated within the context of the broader project of bringing together movements and organisations from the region through the Pan-Amazon Social Forum process (*Fórum Social Pan-Amazônico – FSPA*). Modelled on the principles and ethos of the WSF, there have been five editions of the FSPA since 2002. These have been complimented by a number of smaller ‘Borderless Encounters’ (*Encontros Sem Fronteiras*) – held in the border regions between two or more Amazon countries in preparation for the larger FSPA events – and a Pan-Amazon Assembly held during the WSF 2009. Soon after the Belém forum (July 2009), the FSPA Council met to prepare for the fifth FSPA in 2010, and the manifesto that resulted from this encounter is instructive in terms of understanding the kind of place-based identity that activists are trying to forge:

We are the peoples of the forests, rivers, the rain, the towns, the villages, the cities, the quilombos<sup>126</sup>, the settlements, the social organizations, of the nine countries that share the Pan-Amazon. We are many voices speaking hundreds of languages, making the same calling: we must stop the machine that pushes the planet and humanity to the abyss [...]. We are different so we are strong. Brothers and sisters united in the rejection of a world where the production and distribution of goods is guided by profit and not by the satisfaction of human needs. We are from many peoples, different and mixed; so we reject the single thought, the living standard of economic, social, political, sexual and cultural impositions. That’s the way we are: we struggle to build a world where all worlds fit (Pan-Amazon Social Forum, 2009: n. p.).

Echoing the call of the Zapatistas more than a decade earlier, the manifesto of the FSPA can be read as positing a vision of the Pan-Amazon as a *model* of the kind of ‘world of many worlds’ that they would like to see replicated on a broader scale. The notion of the Pan-Amazon as a place is central here. It is from the particular socio-natural characteristics of the region – which, importantly, is conceived

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<sup>126</sup> Quilombos are settlements in the interior of Brazil founded by escaped slaves of African descent during the colonial period.

as incorporating cities as well as forests – combined with its position in geopolitical configurations of power as a site of past and future struggles, that the identity of the Pan-Amazon is derived:

We know that the Pan-Amazon is one of the most important scenes of the battle on which hangs the salvation of the planet and mankind. The wisdom of our forebears, transmitted over centuries of resistance, brings us to understand the need to unite, weaving into a single plan all of our many differences (Pan-Amazon Social Forum, 2009: n. p.).

The efforts of CEPEPO activists to strengthen movement-based communication in the Pan-Amazon can be understood as part of this project of uniting the movements and organisations in the region. Although activists welcomed and sought to take advantage of the opportunities that the WSF appeared to open up for disseminating their material at a global scale, there was also a strong sense of the need for the peoples and movements of the Amazon to take ownership of the knowledge that they produce and share this among themselves. In order for this to be possible, they require their own public sphere.

Like the WSF as a whole, the public that these activists envisage is a peculiar kind of counterpublic. On the one hand, it is clearly oppositional, in the sense that it would be constituted through the production and circulation of discourses by social movements that are against neoliberal capitalism. On the other, given that the Pan-Amazon spans nine countries, it has no obvious counterpart in the form of a general public at the same scale that it can define itself against or demand inclusion in. The purpose of activists' efforts to strengthen movement-based communication networks in the Amazon is not simply to facilitate resistance to dominant discourses or claims-making directed towards dominant publics; it is also to facilitate the elaboration and proliferation of positive *alternatives* to currently hegemonic models of social, political, and economic organisation. Ilma Bittencourt summed this up eloquently:

The social movements have a lot of information about how another world is possible, not in the way it is [currently] being created, [in] the model of the imperialist market, but in the form of family agriculture, alternative forms of fishing, of food production, social movements' construction in their communities, how they are constructing more egalitarian relations. So I think this creation of another possible world is in our hands. If we manage to appropriate the tools, and understand communication as a human right, and put this forward through the opportunities that are being given to us today, we will manage to change the world (interview, February 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

## ***Conclusion***

This chapter has highlighted the centrality of place (and the politics of place) to the practices and imaginaries of communication activists in Belém. Their efforts to construct public spheres for poor urban communities and to strengthen movement-based communication networks in the Pan-Amazon are informed by their experience of and commitment to place-based struggles. In both cases, the importance of 'local subalterns' having their own public spheres in which to engage in autonomous knowledge production, whether at the local or regional scale, emerges as a central theme. Such publics can be described as place-based – in the sense that they are defined explicitly with reference to a specific geographical territory – but they are not place-bound. Rather, such publics form the basis from which to engage with wider publics at different scales. In the case of the *Rádio dos Povos*, activists' concern to facilitate a deeper understanding of issues pertaining to the Amazon among the local population provided the occasion for drawing in activists from elsewhere to share their experiences of similar struggles. In the case of CEPEPO's longer-term project, the construction of a regional counterpublic in the Pan-Amazon was conceived as a starting point for the elaboration and proliferation of alternatives which might contribute to the construction of 'another possible world'.

Insofar as they seek to establish connections and relationships between different place-based actors, their communication practices

can be conceived as expressive of a place-based globalism. This is not, however, a case of moving directly from the 'local' to the 'global'. Recognising how movements and communities are prevented from developing their own knowledges and sense of identity due to their exclusion from mass mediated publics, activists see it as a priority to help such communities and movements construct their own public spheres at the local and regional scale.

In attempting to create public spheres in which possible future experiences as well as currently existing but marginalised alternatives can be made manifest, these activists might be seen as practising what Santos (2006a) refers to as the sociology of absences and the sociology of emergences. As outlined in Chapter 1, the former involves making present and credible practices which have been produced as absent and non-credible, while the latter entails identifying and enlarging signs of possible future experiences contained in tendencies and latencies that are ignored by currently hegemonic constructions of reality. For the activists who are the subjects of this chapter, the production of this kind of knowledge needs to happen through 'bottom-up' processes that start from a particular place. Their efforts to strengthen movement-based communication infrastructures can be interpreted as attempts to create conditions for the production of what Santos (2007a) refers to as 'postmodern knowledge': knowledge concerned with the possibilities of human action projected into the world from particular time-spaces (see Chapter 1).

In what ways might these communication practices contribute to extending the WSF public? Whereas previous chapters have explored the different ways in which the WSF public might be extended 'from the centre' (either by forum organisers or by communication activists with long-term experience of the WSF), this chapter has demonstrated how the WSF public might be extended 'from below' by place-based actors who seek to appropriate it for their own purposes. As we have seen, this has not simply been a case

of 'local' actors demanding inclusion in a 'global' WSF public; rather, the arrival of the WSF in Belém contributed to setting in motion complex place-based dynamics. Extending the WSF public, from this perspective, is not so much a matter of circulating discourse within communication networks that are self-evidently global in scale. Rather, it entails the proliferation of publics at multiple scales, which may interact and overlap in complex ways. As discussed in Chapter 1, such distributed and decentred publics might be conceived as global in the sense that the agency and self-reflexivity of communication activists help constitute a global condition out of place-based but connected struggles (Bohman, 2007; Sassen, 2006). The next chapter looks more closely at how communication technologies can be used to invoke a sense of globality and belonging to a global WSF public.

## 7. Grassrooting the WSF public: decentralised globality and the affective experience of encounter

*I think intercommunication is that there is a desire to communicate with people that are in an analogous situation and that you kind of expect something from this interchange as a participant in a global process. So it's different from media where you want information but you don't want to have a transaction with other people, just get the information, it's a one-way information flow. Intercommunication is really trying to have the Forum experience despite this obstacle of distance basically (Pierre George, interview, February 2009).*

*The technology to connect the Forum with the whole world is there, we are talking about the connection that is your sense of [...] belonging to that situation that is happening at the forum event, of you being part, because you say 'the forum started, it's just that the forum is far away, and I'm here, so I am going to carry out an action to bring that which is over there a little bit closer'. So it's not just that palpable thing, of realising that one is here and another is there [...]. What we are trying to do, because it is a bit symbolic for us, is to show that it is possible to be connected through technology (Rita Freire, interview, March 2009, my translation from Portuguese).*

Throughout this thesis, I have explored – through case studies of different communication practices – various ways in which the WSF public might be extended through mediated communication. Chapter 3 considered the complexities of engaging with general publics via mass media; Chapter 4 focused on efforts to make tools available for WSF participants to document and make publicly available their ideas and proposals. Chapter 5 considered how the WSF public might be extended through the circulation of alternative media content and through a movement-building approach aimed at involving as many actors as possible in doing communication, and Chapter 6 focused on efforts by place-based actors in the Amazon to extend the WSF public 'from below' by taking advantage of dynamics set in motion by the

forum to construct their own place-based publics spheres, which in turn form the basis for engagement with wider publics.

All of the preceding chapters have explored the potential of various communication practices as a *means* to making publics and facilitating knowledge production. In this chapter, I shift the focus slightly to consider the significance of communication as an end in itself, by looking at the social meanings attached to the *possibility of being connected* through mediated communication. The chapter considers how the WSF public might be extended through activists' innovative use of communication technologies to facilitate intercommunication among actors in different parts of the world. In particular, I examine the use of easily available web tools to enable real-time audio-visual connections across geographical distance.

Key to these practices is the notion of a 'decentralised' WSF that does not simply take place in a particular physical location, but consists of multiple local actions in different parts of the world connected through communication. I consider how activists' efforts to connect such decentralised activities not only contribute to the construction of transnational networks for the circulation of discourse, but also help construct a *sense* of globality and feeling of belonging to a global WSF process. In one respect, the use of video conference technology to enable real-time audio-visual connections between actors in different geographical locations might facilitate circulation and exchange of knowledge. Equally important, however, is the contribution such interconnections might make to the construction of thick solidarity and – crucially – a sense of belonging to a global WSF process *by virtue of being connected*. These practices are not so much about creating a global WSF public in the sense of a unified communication space at the global scale, as a way to create a sense of globality through the fact of being connected.

The chapter is structured around three case studies, each of which looks at communication practices that can be described as concerned with 'grassrooting' the WSF public, in the sense that they

seek to extend the 'forum experience' beyond the world event itself. I begin by looking at the WSF 2008, which instead of one centralised social forum event took the form of a Global Day of Action (GDA) with hundreds of local activities taking place simultaneously around the world. I suggest that it was activists' use of mediated communication that made the GDA a global event, not just in the sense of making the various local actions visible and known, but by creating a sense of globality generated by the *idea* of being connected through communication technologies. Next, I turn to the WSF 2009, which, inspired by the experience of the GDA, was conceived by communication activists as taking an 'expanded' form, with groups in other parts of the world connecting to the Belém forum via video conference technology. Although at first glance this might be conceived as an attempt to extend the 'global public' gathered at the WSF 2009 by enabling actors who were not physically present to participate directly in conversations taking place there, I suggest that the significance of these live audio-visual connections lies not so much in their ability to facilitate 'unmediated' communication across geographical distance as in their pedagogical potential and the sense of belonging to a global WSF public that they generate. Finally, I look at efforts to 'grassroot' the WSF public 'from the peripheries' by communication activists in a poor urban community in the south of Brazil, who appropriated the concept of an expanded social forum for their own purposes and in so doing challenged conventional notions of place and scale, centre and periphery, in complex ways.

### ***Decentralising the WSF: the Global Day of Action 2008***

The WSF process will be characterised in 2008 by a set of simultaneous activities conducted regionally and/or locally all over the world and one common day of global impact and visibility reinforced by common communication strategy [*sic*] and tools (World Social Forum, 2007a: 3).

The idea of a completely decentralised WSF was first realised in 2008, when instead of one world event there was a week of mobilisation culminating in a Global Day of Action (GDA) on 26 January, with over 1000 activities taking place in 80 countries (World Social Forum, 2008). The decision to hold the WSF in this decentralised format had emerged out of debates within the International Council (IC) about the appropriateness and effectiveness of organising a global event every year. There had been a sense among many that organising and mobilising for a centralised WSF event on an annual basis required too much time and resources, drawing activists' energies and attention away from day-to-day local struggles. Questions had also been raised about 'gigantism' and the sustainability of organising a large event every year bringing together tens of thousands of activists from all over the world in one physical location. There was a sense among some that in order to expand and strengthen the WSF as an ongoing process, it was necessary to find ways of bringing the Forum closer to activists in different locations.

At least partly as a result of such concerns, the WSF already had assumed a decentralised format in 2006, when instead of one global event there were three regional social forums (in Caracas, Venezuela; Bamako, Mali; and Karachi, Pakistan) taking place almost simultaneously.<sup>127</sup> Building on this experience, the idea of decentralisation was taken one step further with the decision that the WSF 2008 should consist entirely of local actions. This appears to have been motivated by a concern to strengthen local struggles and initiatives: the content and themes of these actions were to be defined by movements and organisations themselves, in accordance with their own priorities, within a general framework provided by a call for mobilisation from the IC (World Social Forum, 2007b: 3). The

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<sup>127</sup> The Bamako forum took place from 19-23 January 2006 and the Caracas forum from 24-29 January. The Karachi forum, originally planned for 24-29 January, had to be postponed due to the Kashmir earthquake in October 2005 and took place from 24-29 March 2006.

report from the IC meeting in Belém in October 2007 suggests that there was a clear emphasis on allowing the agenda for the day to emerge ‘from the bottom up’ rather than be defined at a global level:

[T]he GDA call from the IC would be a general framework, but the contents, themes, priorities will be put inside the day of action by the networks, movements, groups, etc. Organizations are being encouraged to make their own appeals, to help diffusing and organizing other organizations in their localities. There is no global theme or priority, the idea is the opposite, to give visibility to the themes and priorities that we already work with (World Social Forum, 2007c: 12).

At the same time, these local actions needed to be placed within a common framework and given a sense of coherence as part of a global WSF process. According to the report from the October 2007 IC meeting, the objective of the GDA was conceptualised as being

to give global visibility and impact to all articulations made by different groups in their localities and give strength to all of them in a global framework, interlinking initiatives and involving new social actor [*sic*] in the WSF process (World Social Forum, 2007c: 12).

With no centralised WSF event taking place, this global framework would necessarily have to be constructed through the use of mediated communication. In order to bring together all of the activities taking place during the GDA, a website was created where activists could register and provide information about their actions.<sup>128</sup> The site had various features designed to give visibility to these actions; including a world map showing the location of each activity, which were also intended as a way to facilitate connections between different initiatives.

[The website] will allow people to register, publish their actions and connect with other initiatives. The website is structured more by actions than by organizations, and in the Google map available, you’ll be able to find and contact other initiatives (World Social Forum, 2007c: 12).

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<sup>128</sup> [www.wsf2008.net](http://www.wsf2008.net) (the site is no longer operational in its original form).

In an important sense, the website for the GDA might be described as an attempt to recreate, in virtual form, the physical space usually provided by centralised WSF events to help movements and organisations gain visibility for their struggles and establish connections with others. Similar to the way in which each workshop or seminar at a social forum event takes place in a particular physical space (for example, a classroom or auditorium), each action registered on the GDA website was assigned a ‘space’ within the site in which organisers could upload and edit information about what they were doing. Participants were then able to seek out and visit the ‘spaces’ of other groups to learn about their activities and get in touch if they wished.<sup>129</sup>

In addition to the website, members of the Communication Commission organised a number of other initiatives in order to give visibility and coherence to the different actions taking place. The Commission’s press team, together with the WSF office in São Paulo, coordinated efforts to promote the GDA to international media. This work included the production of press packs in different languages, efforts to mobilise a transnational network of sympathetic journalists, and the organisation of 23 press conferences in different countries. Members of the Commission coordinated the production of video reports by over 30 groups around the world, which were posted on the WSF TV site. The Ciranda network coordinated alternative media coverage, which focused not just on the actions taking place but also sought to provide more background information and in-depth analysis of the issues and struggles that were important in different parts of the world. This material was published in a dedicated section of the Ciranda website and organised by time zones, so that material relating to different locations within the same time zone was grouped together.

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<sup>129</sup> In this respect, the GDA website prefigured many of the features of the OpenFSM website discussed in Chapter 4.

The WSF 2008, then, in the form of the Global Day of Action, might be characterised as an event that was constituted in and through mediated communication. This is true in the obvious sense that communication was essential in order for participants to know about activities taking place in other parts of the world. In the words of one communication activist, who was not directly involved in the organisation of the GDA but had been closely involved in the shared communication projects:

Communication was central in order for us to find out about all the things that were happening around the world. As there was no centralised location for the Forum, the Forum took place in more than 80 countries, using communication to enable these actions to dialogue with one another was strategic. If not, Brazil would do its things, Germany would do its things, Africa, and nobody would find out about anything. So we know that the fact that there was already a sense within the WSF, within the IC as well, that using communication as a tool to articulate these actions was fundamental, guaranteed that last year the world was connected in some form at that moment (Bia Barbosa, interview, January 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

Mediated communication, in other words, was what made the WSF 2008 a *global* event and not just a set of dispersed local actions. The use of communication technologies to give visibility and connect people was, however, not simply about making known what was happening in different places. It was also about creating a *sense* of globality, of being part of a global phenomenon – previously something that WSF participants would have gained from being physically co-present with activists from all over the world at social forums.

The important thing [...] was the conviction that at the moment when the Forum decided that in 2008 it would have a Global Day of Action, it would not just have one event but a multiplicity of simultaneous actions and events, and that these had to be connected in order to form part of the same thing – I don't want to say connected via the internet, I mean connected in some way to the proposal for a Global Day of Action – we perceived that the Forum transferred this edition to a subjective territory of communication. So, it's not that it didn't have a territory, the forum. It did, it's just that it wasn't physical. It was a territory in which the different activities in physical space interrelated with the others (Rita Freire, interview, March 2009, my translation from

Portuguese).

What this suggests is a sense that the *idea* of being connected, of forming part of the same 'subjective territory of communication', is as important as the actual fact of being connected and the information that gets exchanged through these connections. The use of communication technologies to connect diverse and autonomously organised local actions carries high symbolic value, suggestive as it is of an alternative sense of globality; the 'world in which there is room for many worlds' that the WSF arguably stands for.

The GDA also provided the occasion for the first systematic experimentation within the WSF process with the use of web tools to establish live connections between groups in different places.<sup>130</sup> Activists linked to the Communication Commission organised a day of live connections with various groups around the world on 26 January, with one group operating from France and another from Barcelona, in association with NOVA.<sup>131</sup> One of the participants in the Barcelona project describes the experience in the following terms:

We were a team of international activists coming from different countries and we organised this day of connections. It started in the early morning with connections with the Philippines and then basically going through the whole globe and finishing with South America, as soon as activities were starting. So we were calling people and asking 'how was your activity?' and 'how many people participated?', 'how do you feel with this experiment of the Global Day of Action?', 'do you feel the connection with the World Social Forum?' and it just turned out to be a very good experience (Martina Pignatti, interview, February 2009).<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> A video conference had been held in 2001 between participants at the first WSF in Porto Alegre and representatives from the World Economic Forum taking place simultaneously in Davos, Switzerland. However, cheap internet tools for video conferences were not available at the time; this connection was done using satellite equipment. A small number of live internet connections had subsequently been organised, for example between Bamako and Caracas during the WSF 2006 and at the US Social Forum in Atlanta in 2007, but not in a systematic manner.

<sup>131</sup> NOVA is a Catalan association that works to promote citizen participation, nonviolence, and transparency. It has as a key objective to strengthen the WSF process.

<sup>132</sup> Martina Pignatti is an Italian activist who works for the NGO Un Ponte Per. She was one of the coordinators of the Belém Expanded initiative at the WSF 2009.

Again, what comes across strongly is the way in which communication technologies contribute to creating a *feeling* of connectedness. More of a performative than a question, the act of calling up activist groups around the world to ask whether they ‘feel the connection to the WSF’ simultaneously constitutes this feeling of connection. Given that most of the activities that were organised as part of the GDA were local or national in scope, in terms of the constituencies they mobilised and the issues they focused on, these moments of connection might be conceived as the ‘glue’ that brought them together within a common global framework. Though in a basic sense, such a global framework was already provided by the WSF’s Charter of Principles and the call for participation in the GDA, the use of communication technologies to connect groups in different parts of the world seems fundamental to making this sense of globality tangible, something that it is possible to experience first-hand and not just identify with at an abstract level. In the following section, I consider how this idea of live interconnections was adapted in 2009 as a means to ‘expand’ the Belém WSF.

### ***Expanding the WSF: Belém Expanded***

Belém Expanded I think demonstrated that from Congo to Palestine, from European cities to Asian ones, that even just the idea of being able to connect, for a group to [connect with] another group at a distance, already, it brings a lot of enthusiasm [...]. Of course that’s not enough for a movement that wants to change the world but it’s a beginning (Jason Nardi, interview, February 2009).

The experience of the GDA influenced the way in which the WSF 2009 was conceptualised in at least two important respects. It gave rise, first, to the idea that the Belém forum also could have a decentralised component in the form of activities taking place simultaneously in other parts of the world, and, second, to the idea that these decentralised activities could be connected in real time to Belém. During the WSF 2009, activists involved in the Intercommunications

Working Group of the Communication Commission facilitated the organisation of a programme of activities – brought together under the moniker ‘Belém Expanded’ – that incorporated live interconnections between activists who were at the forum site and activists in other parts of the world. The majority of these took the form of workshops lasting an hour or more, during which groups in Belém would discuss issues of common concern with groups in other parts of the world. Most of the interconnections were done using Skype video call, enabling participants in different locations to interact in real time through sound and live images. The workshops took place in five classrooms on the campus of the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), and made use of a simple set-up that included a computer, web camera, microphone, projector, and loudspeakers. Live images of the group connecting from outside Belém were projected onto a screen and their voices could be heard through the loudspeakers; live sound and images from Belém were captured using microphones and web cameras, and transmitted to the group at the other end.

Some of these connections involved delegates reporting back to their organisations and collectives at home; others involved interactions with previously unknown counterparts. Some were coordinated prior to the WSF using the OpenFSM website discussed in Chapter 4, through a process by which groups advertised their intentions and found partners with similar interests. Others happened more spontaneously, with Belém Expanded organisers finding appropriate conversation partners on the day by inviting forum participants to join workshops. During the WSF 2009, 30 video conferences were held with activist groups in different parts of the world, including Europe, North and South America, Africa, and the Middle East. Many of these groups had organised their own events and activities in connection with the WSF, including meetings, rallies, workshops, and performances; these decentralised activities were presented by Belém Expanded organisers as part of an expanded

social forum event encompassing a virtual as well as a physical territory. Reinforcing this sense of a decentralised social forum territory, the Belém Expanded programme included a world map showing the location of each decentralised activity.

How might this concept of an ‘expanded’ social forum be understood? Whereas in 2008 the WSF had assumed a completely decentralised format, the notion of an expanded social forum retains the emphasis on the physical territory of the forum event; the objective seemingly being to expand this territory using communication technologies. As highlighted in Chapter 1, a frequent criticism against the WSF is that it excludes people who do not have the resources or inclination to travel. Within a framework that conceptualises the WSF as a global public sphere, the idea of expanding the Forum might be conceived as an attempt to make it *more* global; that is, to make it live up to its promise of globality by including actors who cannot be physically present. In this respect, Belém Expanded might be said to have served a dual purpose. First, in the words of one organiser, it helped ‘to bring to the rest of the world the contents of the forum in Belém and the ideas of indigenous people and the need to save the Amazon’ (Martina Pignatti, interview, February 2009). Second, it provided a means for actors who were unable to travel to Belém to bring their ideas, proposals, and knowledges to the WSF (cf. Velitchkova et al., 2009: 206).

On such a reading, efforts to expand the WSF beyond a given physical territory might be seen as an attempt to realise the classic ideals of openness and inclusion associated with the concept of the public sphere. Significantly, Belém Expanded organisers emphasised the direct and ‘unfiltered’ form of communication that live interconnections make possible:

We don’t filter the information. It’s not us writing an article or making a radio programme and so somehow building the information that gets produced, we just... what we have done until now, at least, is to prepare the technical setup and then people do their exchange (Martina Pignatti, interview, February 2009).

This highlights what is perhaps the most novel feature of this form of communication: that it enables, or at least approximates, across distance the kind of face-to-face interaction that previously has been possible only among actors who are physically co-present. Enabling participants to interact as if they were in the same physical space was, as one organiser explained, a key aim: ‘the idea is to favour a kind of virtual meeting as if it were a normal workshop and an exchange of opinions and ideas between people that are not in the same physical space’ (Martina Pignatti, interview, February 2009). In this sense, Belém Expanded might be understood as an attempt to replicate at a distance the ‘unmediated’ face-to-face communication associated with the ideal-typical Habermasian public sphere that is usually only possible through physical co-presence.<sup>133</sup>

However, the significance of such communication practices cannot be fully grasped within a liberal framework of inclusion. Perhaps most obviously, insofar as they take place within the context of relatively small-scale workshops involving a point-to-point interaction between two groups, video conferences cannot really be said to connect activists in other locations to a ‘general’ WSF public in the sense of a unified communication space that includes all forum participants. As discussed in Chapter 1, the WSF public is not best understood in such concrete spatial terms, but rather as constituted through the circulation of discourse. In this sense, workshops incorporating live interconnections might be conceived as instantiations of the WSF public, as occasions for the elaboration and circulation of discourse, rather than a means for participants on the ‘outside’ to be included in the WSF public that is ‘inside’ the forum event.

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<sup>133</sup> Such interconnections are, of course, never entirely ‘unmediated’ – no form of communication is. Even within a bounded material space of interpersonal contiguity communication is still mediated as it inevitably involves the re-embedding of mass-circulated symbolic materials into contexts of face-to-face dialogue (Barnett, 2003; Thompson, 1995).

Second, and following on from this point, the encounters that video conferences make possible cannot be conceived simply as a means to include, through rational debate and exchange of ideas, already-existing perspectives that currently are excluded from the WSF. There are particular features of these encounters that suggest they are significant in their own right, not just as occasions for the exchange of information. What stands out, both in interviews with organisers and from participant observation at workshops, is the strong affective dimension of live audio-visual connections. This comes across clearly in the distinction that Pierre George, who played a key role in the organisation of Belém Expanded, makes between the ‘cold’ communication that takes place through email and other textual forms and the ‘warm’ communication that video conferences facilitate:

Cold intercommunication is through email so it’s not instant, so you need to project yourself [...], your counterpart is an abstract partner. This is a place for planning, for making arguments, presenting papers, presenting ideas, structures etcetera, but it’s not the place for emotion. Emotion [...] comes from seeing people and hearing them and the voice, the smile... (interview, February 2009).

The emphasis placed here on the multi-sensory experience facilitated by live audio-visual connections suggests that what is most significant about face-to-face communication is not necessarily the ‘unmediated’ exchange of information that it makes possible. Rather, there is something about the encounter itself that makes it important. As the following interview extract suggests, a key objective of Belém Expanded was to make the *experience* of the encounter available to as many actors as possible:

I just want to provide occasions for people that don’t travel to have the emotion of the encounter, and after the emotion be able to have dialogic moment of a higher analytical content. Which means that they can make up their minds in a more autonomous way and they do not depend [on] representation that will be transmitted by third parties, like media or their own organisation leaders, who are being paid. We receive the money to travel, always the same people, and constitute a filter [...] so people that are on a

grassroots level have no way to get access to the real enrichment of the contact with other people, other cultures, realising that people have similar problems, different culture... (Pierre George, interview, February 2009).

While the purpose of live audio-visual connections is still conceived as being to give direct or 'unfiltered' access to the WSF for those who cannot be physically present, the emphasis here is not so much on the information and ideas that are exchanged as on the transformative effects of the encounter itself. In this respect, Belém Expanded might be seen as an attempt to democratise the kind of learning through encounters across difference for which the WSF has been celebrated. As discussed in Chapter 1, a number of commentators have sought to theorise the WSF as a pedagogical space, noting the parallels between the ethos of open space and Freirian critical pedagogy. Central to such pedagogical visions of the WSF has been the emphasis placed on the transformative potential of the encounters across difference that it enables, which might radically change participants' perception of social reality and contribute to deepening their understanding of neoliberal globalisation (Andreotti, 2005; Andreotti & Dowling, 2004; Olivers, 2004).

Thus conceived, video conferences might be seen as an effort to recreate, at a distance, the kind of pedagogical space provided by the WSF event itself, and the direct dialogue that they make possible as having an important pedagogical function in its own right. By enabling actors in different geographical locations to speak directly to one another, video conferences have the potential to facilitate a deeper understanding of the cultural, social, and political contexts of 'distant others' than that made possible through conventional media. As Pierre George suggests, being able to see, hear, and interact in real time with people from other parts of the world stimulates a much deeper level of reflection than just being exposed to media reports about them:

There is a whole dimension of cultural encounter and understanding of globalisation [...]. To make people project themselves into global issues, for me they have to meet people from other places, because otherwise it's a very self-defined image of globalisation where you can put all your frustrations, and at the end of the day [...] we are prone to be in a kind of recessive state where you would put the problem on other people. Whereas when you have them in front of you then you really have to [engage] with them [...], you just cannot wipe them out and just consider them as images or concepts, they are really here (interview, February 2009).

As an example of the transformative effects that such encounters can have, George described a video conference he had helped organise between French trade unionists and Indian workers on the issue of offshoring, and the impact that this had on the French workers:

The fact of seeing Indian people that were in the progressive movement etcetera talk with different language about outsourcing was a shock for the people, it was striking. [Rather] than just saying 'oh well, the globalisation and the poor people in India', whatever they said, they speak about them but they are not there, but when they are there speaking, [it's] a different thing. They have other words, other arguments, so the situation is more [...], it's making people change their mind or become aware of things that [...] by intellectual laziness or by comfort they wouldn't have elaborated (interview, February 2009).

In these examples, which emphasise the pedagogical function of direct dialogue, the emotion generated by such encounters appears to be conceived as a route to a 'higher' form of analytical understanding. As George states in the interview extract quoted on page 248, what he wants is for people who cannot travel 'to have the emotion of the encounter, and after the emotion be able to have a dialogic moment of a higher analytical content'. The implication here is that the emotional reaction provoked by direct encounters is of a different strength and quality than that prompted by exposure to media representations, and that this in turn stimulates deeper reflection on the issues at stake.

Beyond its pedagogical function, however, the affective dimension of such encounters is also significant in its own right. Arguably, the visceral experience of being physically co-present with people from all over the world who share the same basic political

vision is one of the most powerful features of social forums, and it is often this that makes the most profound impact, on participants and commentators alike (Osterweil, 2004a). While the emergence of the internet and new communication technologies has been crucial to the formation of transnational social movement networks, physical proximity remains important for the development of bonds of solidarity and mutual trust (Kavada, 2007).<sup>134</sup> As Pierre George suggests,

I think the experience of encounter is a big component of the attractiveness of social forums. This can be a very basic feeling [...] at individual level then you can get to a collective feeling like your organisation encountering together. But it's mainly, that's the main output of the Forum because then people develop the feeling of understanding, a feeling of solidarity [...]. It's not just sharing abstract ideas (interview, February 2009).

Making this experience of encounter available to those who cannot be physically present can in this sense be understood as an attempt to use communication technologies to create a sense of belonging to a global process, similar to the way in which web tools were used to connect decentralised activities during the GDA in 2008. The use of video conference technology to connect activists in different places thus has an important symbolic function, over and beyond the actual content of the exchanges it facilitates, in the sense that it generates a feeling of being connected to the global. This can be an important source of motivation for activists working in difficult conditions:

It helps the morale of many activists that are working in very hard conditions or that feel marginalised and it also induces much more creativity in planning your activities and actions. Indeed, by learning how other people act in other context you can then apply some of those ideas to your context, and maybe be more effective in some of your actions or transform them somehow... in general this idea of creating a global community among people that share certain political and social principles, I think [...] it really gives more determination and motivation to many people (Martina Pignatti, interview, February 2009).

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<sup>134</sup> In this sense, the rise of (relatively) cheap international travel might be considered just as important to the emergence of the alter-globalisation movement as the development of new communication technologies.

‘Expanding’ the WSF through the use of video conference technology is therefore not only about expanding the forum ‘territory’ in order to include more actors and ideas; it is also about expanding the *idea of* the WSF, as Pierre George’s response to my question below suggests:

H: When you talk about expansion do you talk about the expansion of ideas?

P: Expansion of process, expansion of the idea of a social forum process, which means that there is this thing that binds people in a very fuzzy way, but effective way, in a way, because it creates a feeling of solidarity, which is partly true, partly assumed. But it’s important for people to feel that they are not alone with their problems. When they feel part of something which is a warm process and they can get a glimpse of this process through effective intercommunication and not just abstract thinking, I think that’s getting them involved in a more effective way (interview, February 2009).

Live audio-visual interconnections, then, can contribute to generating a sense of identification with the idea of a global WSF process, not just at the level of agreement with rational arguments and abstract ideas, but as a form of communicative action that it is possible to participate directly in. As Jason Nardi suggests in the interview extract quoted at the beginning of this section, the very *idea* of being able to connect with people in other parts of the world carries huge symbolic value. In other words, it is perhaps not so much the connections themselves, or even the content of the exchanges that they facilitate, as the social meanings attached to the *ability to connect* that are most significant in terms of stimulating a sense of participation in a global WSF public.<sup>135</sup>

Following on from the WSF 2009, the ‘expanded’ concept has been taken up by various actors around the world. The methodology was incorporated in some of the events that were organised in 2010, when the WSF took the form of a series of local, national, regional,

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<sup>135</sup> In this respect, live interconnections have much in common with the movement-building approach to extending the WSF public discussed in Chapter 5, which is as much concerned with mobilisation and building relations of solidarity as with the circulation of media content. As shown above, live interconnections might contribute to constructing solidarity in at least two respects: by facilitating pedagogical encounters that might generate a deeper understanding of ‘distant others’ and by generating a sense of belonging to the same global phenomenon.

and thematic social forums taking place around the world throughout the year. It was also implemented at the WSF 2011 in Dakar, partly through a programme of activities coordinated by the Intercommunication Working Group of the Communication Commission with the help of a group of local volunteers, partly in a more autonomous manner by forum participants taking advantage of the possibilities offered by new communication technologies to connect with groups 'back home' and elsewhere.<sup>136</sup> In the following section, I describe how the organisers of one social forum in 2010 made use of the 'expanded' concept for their own purposes, and explore the complex ways in which this challenges conventional conceptions of place and scale.

### ***Connecting the peripheries: The Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries***

Dunas in the world, the world in Dunas

Another world is here!

(Slogans of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries, my translation from Portuguese)

The Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries (*Fórum Social Expandido das Periferias*) was held in February 2010 in Dunas, a poor urban neighbourhood on the periphery of the city of Pelotas in the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. The event was conceived by its organisers as part of the WSF 2010, and – like Belém Expanded – made use of videoconference technology to enable real-time audio-visual interconnections with groups in other parts of the world. Yet, as a social forum that differed both in qualitative and

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<sup>136</sup> A particularly salient moment was when, during the closing ceremony of the WSF on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2011, which coincided with the fall of the Mubarak government, an Egyptian WSF participant circulated among the crowd gathered in Dakar with a laptop that was connected via video link to his friends in Egypt, in this way linking the 'global public' gathered at the WSF to the historical event in his country.

quantitative terms from the biennial world event, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries provides a very different vantage point on the idea of expanding the WSF. Whereas the GDA and Belém Expanded might be conceived as efforts to decentralise and expand the WSF ‘from the centre’ (in the sense that they were initiated and coordinated by actors who occupy relatively central positions within the WSF), the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries can be understood as an attempt to expand and decentre the WSF ‘from the periphery’.

Like the previous two case studies discussed in this chapter, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries provides an example of how mediated communication can contribute to constructing a *sense* of globality. It also shows how a feeling of belonging to the global can be an important source of motivation and confidence for place-based actors. The use of videoconference technology to connect forum participants in Dunas to people in other parts of the world helped generate a sense of connectedness to globally distributed struggles, and – importantly – to constitute Dunas as a place that is part of the global. This sense of globality was in turn conceived by organisers as giving impetus to a place-based project of social transformation that takes Dunas as a starting point.

Situated three hours by bus from the WSF’s birthplace in Porto Alegre, Dunas is home to a predominantly Afro-Brazilian population of around 30,000; descendants of the slave population that worked in the region’s meat industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The neighbourhood suffers from problems that are common to Brazilian *favelas*: lack of basic infrastructure, low education levels, drug and alcohol addiction, and – not least – stigmatisation in mainstream public opinion as a place of violence and lawlessness. However, the neighbourhood has also had some infrastructure put in place over the last few years, thanks in most part to the efforts of a relatively well-organised community sector. The local community association, the Dunas Development Committee (*Comité de Desenvolvimento Dunas – CDD*),

which brings together a number of organisations operating in the neighbourhood, received financial support from *Casa Brasil* – a federal government project to set up public facilities for access to information and communication technologies in deprived areas – which enabled the construction of a community centre in 2006. Known as the *Incubadora* [Incubator], this is home to a small library, a cluster of computers for internet access, multimedia facilities, and meeting rooms. Adjacent are a sports stadium and a row of shops for local businesses, all of which are managed by CDD.

The Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries was held in and around the community centre and incorporated a range of activities, including a solidarity economy fair, cultural and sports activities, and a children's forum, as well as seminars and debates on a range of issues. An initiative of the University of the Periphery (*Universidade da Periferia*, or *Uniperiferia*), a network that incorporates CDD and various other organisations working in Dunas and nearby areas, it was the latest in a series of social forums held in the neighbourhood over the last decade. Inspired by the preparations for the first WSF in Porto Alegre, Dunas had hosted its first social forum in late 2000, and since then the community had organised a number of social forums in parallel with the main WSF. These include the Dunas Social Forum (*Fórum Social Dunas*) in 2006, the Social Forum of the Communities of Rio Grande (*Fórum Social das Comunidades de Rio Grande*) in 2007, and the Social Forum of the Periphery (*Fórum Social da Periferia*) in 2008. The 2008 event was organised as part of the Global Day of Action, and Dunas participated in the programme of live interconnections that was coordinated from Barcelona.

The experience in 2008 of using video conference to connect with activists in other parts of the world inspired the idea that Dunas could make use of this technology for its own purposes. It also put organisers in touch with the activists who would later organise Belém Expanded. In 2009, one of the coordinators of the Dunas forums, Florismar Oliveira Thomaz, travelled to Belém to participate in the

organisation of 'expanded' activities. His aim, however, was not primarily to help organise Belém Expanded itself, but rather to make use of the initiative for the benefit of Dunas:

Our focus is this community. We didn't come here simply because of Belém Expanded. This was only a tool for us to empower Dunas. Our purpose was not, for example, to simply go to Belém to connect with Barcelona or Paris. What we wanted was to connect Dunas with Paris and with Barcelona. And with Belém. So, our centre is not Belém Expanded, our centre is Dunas (interview, January 2009, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>137</sup>

Expanding the WSF, in other words, was not the main priority; rather, the tools and methodology provided by Belém Expanded offered a framework for efforts to claim a place for Dunas in the WSF process. The assertion that 'our centre is Dunas' is expressive of the strong commitment that forum organisers have to the community. The majority have close connections to the neighbourhood, either as residents or as members of small NGOs with long-term involvement in the community, and their main objectives are to empower the local population and strengthen its capacity for autonomous organisation. There is a strong sense that social transformation has to be grounded in the experiences of people on the ground, and organisers emphasise the importance of valorising local knowledges and practices.

Coupled with this commitment to 'starting from the local' is an equally firm commitment to creating networks for exchange with people in other places. As its name suggests, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries had as a key objective to connect different 'peripheries', the notion of the periphery being used to refer not only to geographical location but to a condition of marginalisation and exclusion.<sup>138</sup> Clearly identifying Dunas as being on the periphery,

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<sup>137</sup> Florismar Oliveira Thomaz is a retired university teacher from the Federal University of Pelotas and one of the founders of *Uniperiferia*. He lives just outside of Pelotas but has been working with the community in Dunas since the mid-1990s.

<sup>138</sup> The notion of 'the periphery' has a particular meaning in the Brazilian context. In general usage, it refers to areas located on the outskirts of big cities and is loaded with

organisers sought to establish and strengthen connections with other actors in analogous positions: from similar neighbourhoods in Pelotas to indigenous communities in the Amazon to housing rights activists from the *banlieus* of Paris. The rationale behind this was outlined by Florismar Oliveira Thomaz in the following terms:

We understand that it is necessary to act locally. But it's no use acting locally without a universal vision, without a vision of everything. And you cannot have a vision of everything without seeking articulations with other places, and exchanging experiences between different places (interview, January 2009, my translation from Portuguese).

Conceiving of communication technologies as central to such forms of exchange, organisers of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries adapted the 'expanded' concept and methodology from the WSF 2009. The majority of activities that formed part of the event were filmed and streamed live online, and many of the seminars incorporated live dialogues with activists in other parts of the world – including France, Spain, Colombia, Mexico, and the Amazon – using Skype video call and chat. This use of communication technologies was explicitly conceived by Oliveira Thomaz as a means to facilitate bottom-up processes of convergence between different place-based knowledges:

When using technologies for sharing of information, for sharing of knowledges that are developed in different places but which in many cases arise from very similar necessities, these knowledges can be shared and transferred and re-appropriated by communities in various parts of the world. And this communication makes possible a synthesis of knowledges which are worked out and developed in different regions, within different cultures (interview, February 2010, my translation from Portuguese).

At first glance, what this suggests is a simultaneous focus on the local and the global, a commitment to 'acting local and thinking global', as the familiar slogan goes. And this global thinking involves

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connotations of deprivation and poverty. 'The periphery' is also claimed as a political identity by many urban social movements wishing to redefine the concept and condition of being on the margins in positive terms.

the creation of communication networks through which people in different places can learn from each other and knowledge developed in different contexts can be brought together. However, there is more to this than just dissemination and exchange of knowledge. The use of communication technologies by organisers of the Dunas forum is not simply about connecting already existing places which have already formed knowledges. Rather, the creation of networks is intimately bound up with place-making; that is, with attempts to construct a particular sense of what Dunas is like as a place. Like the communication activists in Belém who were the subjects of the previous chapter, the organisers of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries use communication technologies in ways that are inextricably bound up with the politics of place.

A major challenge facing community organisers in Dunas is deep-seated internalised prejudice among local residents about the area in which they live. Like the poor urban communities in Belém discussed in the previous chapter, Dunas is represented in almost wholly negative terms in the local mass media, and with little access to alternative discourses, residents have few resources for constructing more positive self-representations. As highlighted above, a key concern for forum organisers is to empower the local community, and an important part of the rationale behind the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries was to raise self-esteem and stimulate local residents to participate actively in collective efforts to improve the area. Incorporating video conferences with activists in other parts of the world into what was otherwise a very community-oriented event was conceived as an important part of this strategy, as another organiser explained:

If the community realises that it is [...] being seen, it is being looked at, that it is being visited by outsiders, the community has a tendency to like this more, to like and then care for and participate. So [...] at the basis of the proposal is this: to make people see that 'no, there are people from the outside coming here, to participate, to interact with us here. So... it's not such a wretched place, it's not that bad living here. It's not that I don't want a better place to

live, but it is better if everybody joins together and works to improve this place here, instead of abandoning it in favour of another place' (Marco Antônio Ramos de Oliveira, interview, February 2010, my translation from Portuguese).

Complex dynamics are at play here. On the one hand, it would appear that the capacity of the local community for transformative action depends on a validating 'gaze from the centre', brought by the physical and virtual presence of international participants (me as researcher included). On the other, organisers' efforts to create a sense of Dunas as a place that is of interest to 'outsiders' and connected to other places through communication technologies is in important ways about staking a claim for Dunas to be situated *in* the world and not simply relegated to the status of the local and marginal, as is usually the case. This sentiment is reflected in one of the main slogans of the forum, '*Dunas Mundo no Mundo Dunas*', an approximate English translation of which might be 'Dunas in the world, the world in Dunas'. The same organiser explained the slogan in the following terms:

It's this connection to... it's more in the other sense, of bringing the world inside, but not necessarily the outside world. It is to transform Dunas in the world, in its own world, with its own life that... ventures outside, which shares with this other outside world. It is also about bringing this world [to Dunas] but not to live according to this world. It is about generating conditions in which we can guide this outside world, and not have the outside world tell Dunas how it should behave (Marco Antônio Ramos de Oliveira, interview, February 2010, my translation from Portuguese).

Part of the purpose of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries, then, was to construct a sense of Dunas being *part of* the global, not just a locality that is impacted upon by global forces originating elsewhere. The use of communication technologies to connect with people in other parts of the world is, in an important sense, about creating a conception of Dunas as a place from which knowledge emanates, a place that people in other places can learn from. For a few days, the forum inverted conventional notions of centre and periphery, placing Dunas temporarily at the centre of the world. It was

Dunas, not the global public sphere of the WSF, that was being 'expanded'. This notion was invoked explicitly by one organiser who got up on stage during the forum's closing event to announce that it was being broadcast live online and exclaim – to enthusiastic applause – that 'tonight, Dunas is at the centre of the world!'

In the longer term, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries forms part of efforts by organisers to create and strengthen network connections between Dunas and other 'peripheries'. The forum provided the occasion for reaffirming already existing relationships as well as for establishing new links, and – not least – to stimulate ongoing dialogue and the formulation of joint strategies beyond the event itself.<sup>139</sup> However, just as important as the actual connections that are made and the content that is exchanged within them was the *sense* of globality and connectedness invoked by the forum. Organisers' innovative use of communication technologies to create an understanding of Dunas as an important node in global networks is connected to broader efforts to increase self-esteem and encourage a sense of protagonism among the local population. A sense of belonging to the global thus becomes an important resource for a project for social transformation that takes Dunas as its focal point.

The process of social transformation envisaged by forum organisers is one that is grounded in place-based knowledges and practices, developed by and for the local population and starting from its particular needs and experiences. Practising a prefigurative politics, organisers conceive of knowledge as inextricably bound up with efforts to implement alternative modes of social organisation. One organiser gave the following example:

We can set up a clothes manufacturing business here which doesn't have a boss who decides, who is going to exploit people. We can set up an enterprise

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<sup>139</sup> One concrete outcome was a decision to create a permanent transnational network for exchange among 'peripheral' communities.

where people are responsible even when there is nobody who tells them what to do, which is part of a dialogic process. This is a form of truth, a way of knowing differently, of thinking that 'yes, I can', and starting from ourselves here in Dunas, begin to think that we can look after the neighbourhood, that we don't have to wait for the public authorities (Herberto Peil Mereb, interview, February 2010, my translation from Portuguese).<sup>140</sup>

At work here is a conception of truth as produced through practice, through actively *creating* reality. This truth-making is at the same time place-making, focused on the locality as the particular site in which social transformation is effected. Another slogan used by forum organisers encapsulates this very well. A play on the familiar WSF slogan, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries asserted that 'another world is *here*'. Herberto Peil Mereb explained the thinking behind this in the following terms:

The 'here' is [...] the idea that, yes, another world is possible, but where is it that it is happening? It is happening here. So 'another world is here' is the answer for us, for our place. So it is here that we are going to act, where we reside, where we live, where we love. It is here that we make the transformation, here that is the other possible world. It's not there. It is here, where we are (interview, February 2010, my translation from Portuguese).

The implications of this are twofold. First, it highlights the primacy of place; the notion that social transformation is not an abstract process that occurs elsewhere. The assertion that 'another world is *here*' makes it clear that social transformation has to *start from* concrete local realities and practices rather than abstract ideas. Second, it suggests that another world is *already* here; that the kind of social relations that organisers wish to construct already exist – albeit in embryonic form – in Dunas. As Simone Martins, a young woman from Dunas who at the time of my fieldwork was the president of CDD, explained:

We started to think, 'ah, another world is here', right? Because Dunas, as I told

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<sup>140</sup> Herberto Peil Mereb is a member of *Amiz*, an NGO that was originally set up in 1999 by university students at the Federal University of Pelotas for working with the community in Dunas.

you, is a privileged neighbourhood, various cool things happen here, we have various committed people [...]. You could see that the community is a poor community but it is a joyful community, right? Nothing happened, we had four days of the forum and we had no problems. The kids turned up, we can't exclude anyone in the process, regardless of who they are, you know. So it is because of this that another world is here, because the situation is different here, the movement is different; the movement is one of inclusion. This is why it is 'another world is here' (interview, February 2010, my translation from Portuguese).

The emphasis that organisers of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries put on place highlights that what is at stake in their use of communication technologies is not the construction of disembodied global networks that exist above particular places, nor an imaginary in which the global is privileged at the expense of the local. Rather, it is about the creation of networks between different place-based actors and the construction of a sense of globality which does not entail abandoning a commitment to place. Constituted in and through translocal connections achieved through innovative use of communication technologies, the global becomes a resource for empowering local struggles.

This place-based yet global politics challenges conventional understandings of place and scale, in which the local is conceived as physically bounded and nested within hierarchies of scale. By seeking to establish translocal connections with other place-based actors engaged in similar struggles, the forum organisers practice what Sassen (2006: 375) refers to as an 'emergent global politics' that is 'global through the knowing multiplication of local practices'. As discussed in Chapter 1, the notion of globality needs not only refer to phenomena that are self-evidently global in scale; practices like the ones described here might also be considered 'global' in that they involve efforts to insert a particular locality in global social and political processes through the creation of trans-boundary networks with actors in analogous positions (Sassen, 2007). Through their use of new communication technologies, community organisers in Dunas generate a sense of participation in struggles that are globally

distributed. Though they remain focused on their particular place, they frame their struggles explicitly as similar to those of multiple other communities around the world and seek to connect with such communities. In this way, organisers of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries might be seen as engaged in efforts to construct a distributed public sphere that is global by virtue of their explicit invocation of a sense of globality and efforts to build transnational networks (cf. Bohman, 2007; Sassen, 2006).

Such a reconceptualisation of place and scale has implications for the epistemological paradigms through which we understand the knowledge production that these activists seek to facilitate. Within a conventional framework, it might be conceived as local and particularistic, as opposed to more universal 'global' knowledge. However, the practices described here challenge such a rigid dichotomy between the particular and the universal as well as the hierarchy between them. Like the Amazonian communication activists described in the previous chapter, organisers of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries want to empower the production of knowledge that is place-based but not *place-bound*. Insofar as they seek to construct networks in which local knowledges can be shared, community organisers seek to enable the production of 'postmodern knowledge' (Santos) that is projected into the world from particular time-spaces. In this sense, they might be conceived as engaged in a prefigurative politics that demonstrates what the construction of new epistemological imaginaries based on the articulation of place-based knowledges might look like in practice. Their efforts to simultaneously bring the world to Dunas *and* stake a claim for Dunas to be *in* the world illustrate the complex dynamics involved in carving out a locus of enunciation for a community that has been marginalised by hegemonic globalisation.

## *Conclusion*

This chapter has explored three different case studies in which mediated communication has been central to the construction of a sense of globality. Whereas the Global Day of Action and Belém Expanded might be conceived as efforts by actors who occupy a relatively central position within the WSF to ‘decentralise’ and ‘expand’ the forum process in order to bring it closer to localised actors, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries provides an interesting example of how such localised actors can make use of these concepts and methodologies for their own purposes and in the process contribute to expanding the WSF ‘from the periphery’.<sup>141</sup> While the ideas of a ‘decentralised’ or ‘expanded’ social forum both imply a movement outwards from a centre, the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries appears to challenge the centrality of the ‘global’ WSF event itself, by temporarily inverting notions of centre and periphery and on a longer-term basis seeking to construct a network of peripheries that bypasses the centre.

In all of these cases, what stands out is the affective dimension of the connections across geographical distance that communication technologies make possible. In particular, the use of videoconference technology to facilitate live audio-visual interaction between groups in different locations appears to generate a strong sense of connectedness to a global process. It seems, then, that new communication technologies are important not only as a means to facilitate the circulation and articulation of different knowledges at a global scale, but also to the construction of a sense of globality among the actors involved. In other words, the social significance attached to the *possibility of being connected* across the globe is as

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<sup>141</sup> Interestingly, the term ‘expanded’ has since been replaced by ‘extended’ in WSF parlance: at the WSF 2011 the equivalent to Belém Expanded was known as *Dakar Extended*. According to one activist, the change in terminology was partly a response to criticism of the imperialist connotations of the notion of expansion (personal communication, October 2010).

important as the actual connections that are being made. This means that the communication practices described in this chapter (and, quite possibly, the other forms of mediated communication examined in this thesis) might contribute to extending the WSF public not only by enabling the wider circulation of discourse and including more actors in the production of such discourses, but also by stimulating activists around the world to identify as part of a global WSF public.

As Jason Nardi suggests in the interview extract quoted on page 244, the enthusiasm generated by the idea of being able to connect might not be enough for a movement that wants to change the world, but it is undoubtedly an important beginning. Almost certainly, it is a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for the counterpublic constituted by actors who share the aims and principles of the WSF to become more of a general public. As Rita Freire points out in the interview extract quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the technology to connect the WSF to the rest of the world already exists; the challenge is to create a *sense* of connection to the WSF and make this sense of connection proliferate around the world. By extending the affective experience of encounter – previously only afforded by physical contiguity – to localised actors who are unable to travel to the WSF, the practices described in this chapter demonstrate how mediated communication can be used not only for information exchange but to construct the thick forms of solidarity that are necessary in order for the WSF public to become truly global.

## Conclusion

*The knowledge that makes a difference is knowledge that travels and mobilizes, shifting and creating new forces and agents of history in its path (Tsing, 2005: 8).*

Underpinned by a broad question about the role that mediated communication might play in the construction of alternative imaginaries for a world beyond neoliberal capitalism, the aim of this thesis has been to conduct a detailed analysis of communication practices in the WSF – an area that has received little systematic attention in the literature on social forums. As outlined in the Introduction, this study was prompted by two common claims about the WSF: that it is a global process and that it is a space for knowledge production. In order to interrogate these claims, I developed three broad research questions, using the concept of publics as an overarching framework. First, in what ways are forum organisers and communication activists trying to make the WSF public? How might the WSF public be extended through different communication practices? Second, how might different communication practices contribute to making the WSF global? What might this notion of globality entail, and how does the global relate to other scales that have significance for activists? Third, how might mediated communication contribute to processes of knowledge production and to the epistemic project of the WSF? Below, I summarise the key insights that emerge from the case studies presented in the previous five chapters.

### ***Making global publics?***

Starting with the first two questions – which, arising from the idea of the WSF as a global process, form two sides of the same coin – a rather complex picture emerges. In the case of efforts to

communicate the WSF via conventional mass media, making the WSF public means engaging with 'general' publics: generating awareness among the world's majorities that 'another world' is both possible and urgently needed (cf. Whitaker, 2008a: 90). This approach is informed by a conception of publicness that resonates with common usage of the term publicity: 'packaging' information in ways that attract the attention of its intended public. Extending the WSF public through mass media requires taking a proactive approach and translating the practices and imaginaries of WSF participants into a language that resonates with dominant news frames. However, the WSF's 'founding principles' of horizontality and respect for diversity combined with its epistemic distance from hegemonic constructions of social reality make this difficult.

Efforts to communicate the WSF via mass media are complicated also by the predominantly national or subnational orientation of such media. Given the absence of a general public sphere at the global scale, extending the WSF public via mass media involves going via national mediated publics. Constructing a global WSF public in this way would require gaining international media coverage, and for this to be framed in such a way that it generates identification with the WSF. Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to analyse international media coverage of the WSF, the local media's framing of the Belém forum illustrates the challenges involved in adopting such a strategy, given the mass media's tendency to frame issues and events in accordance with what they perceive as the interests of their public. In brief, although the WSF might gain more visibility in mass mediated publics if it manages to adopt a more coherent media strategy, this is by itself unlikely to generate a sense of belonging to a global WSF public among those publics. This is not least because of the non-dialogic character of such media, which means their capacity to generate thick solidarity is limited.

If communicating the WSF to mass media requires packaging information to resonate with dominant news frames, the open space approach discussed in Chapter 4 is underpinned by an altogether different conception of publicness. For proponents of the initiatives discussed in this chapter, making the WSF public means enabling forum participants to document and make publicly available their own ideas and proposals in a self-directed manner, without any ‘filtering’ of the kind required to gain space in mass media. Based on ideals of autonomy and plurality, transparency and free circulation of information, this conception of publicness is informed by a broader ethos of openness within contemporary social movements. This is an ethos that in many respects resonates with the normative criteria attached to the classic concept of the public sphere, particularly in its emphasis on transparency and inclusion. However, insofar as the ideal of openness is conceived as a counterpoint to the hegemonic closure associated with consensus formation, it also radicalises liberal conceptions of publicness. For proponents of these initiatives, extending the WSF public means converting the ideas and proposals of WSF participants into texts that are ‘exportable’ beyond the time-space of particular forum events, and by doing so ensuring that the WSF is open to new actors and emergent knowledges.

The ideal of openness is associated with a somewhat diffuse notion of globality, in the sense that making the WSF ‘truly global’ means making it ‘truly open’. This can be conceived in terms of transparency – making information available online where it can in principle be found by anyone anywhere in the world – and in terms of the more radical understanding of openness as openness to the infinite richness and possibilities of the world. However, the ‘laissez faire’ approach adopted in order to conform to (particular interpretations of) the open space concept has failed to involve the majority of WSF participants in documentation and resulted in a set of rather dispersed initiatives, highlighting that openness-in-principle does not necessarily equal inclusiveness or globality in practice.

A more 'intentional' approach to making the WSF public has been developed by activists involved in the shared communication projects discussed in Chapter 5. Explicitly partisan, shared communication activists align themselves clearly with movements of subordinate groups and work actively to 'give voice' to such groups, not just by producing media coverage *about* them but by enabling them to do their own communication. The notion of publicness discernible in the concept and practice of shared communication is distinctly *counterpublic*: a key concern for activists is to strengthen movement-based communication and facilitate the production and circulation of oppositional discourses. Shared communication might extend the WSF public in two main ways: first, through the circulation of media content produced by WSF participants (within online alternative media networks or through public broadcasters); second, through a movement-building approach – captured by the slogan 'communicate to mobilise to communicate' – that seeks to involve as many actors as possible in doing communication.

Shared communication is perhaps best conceived as a multi-scalar approach to making the WSF public. Having started out as an initiative organised by Brazilian activists, to a certain extent it has retained this national orientation, which is evident in a strong sense of collective identity among Brazilian activists and the efforts of some to disseminate content via national public broadcasters. At the same time, shared communication has from the outset also had a global ambition. This is perhaps most apparent in the way Ciranda was conceived as a means for sharing alternative media content online. However, extending the WSF public through shared communication is not just a matter of 'going global' through the internet. For activists who subscribe to the movement-building approach, it also involves more 'subterranean' processes of mobilisation and network-building to enable the proliferation of shared communication practices around the world.

An example of how this might happen is the impetus that the WSF and the shared communication projects gave to the work of communication activists in Belém. In one respect, making the WSF public for these activists meant making it known among the local resident population and – in the case of the *Rádio dos Povos* – enabling them to interact with WSF participants through mediated communication. Their practices can be understood as efforts to extend the WSF public ‘from below’, but this cannot be conceived simply in terms of the inclusion of ‘local’ actors within the ‘global’ WSF public. As the longer-term project to strengthen movement-based communication in the Pan-Amazon suggests, extending the WSF public can perhaps more appropriately be conceived as involving the proliferation of shared communication practices around the world, which in turn might contribute to the construction of networked and overlapping publics at multiple scales (cf. Bohman, 2007; Sassen, 2006).

Discernible in the practices discussed in Chapter 6 is a conception of publicness that is connected strongly to place. Activists’ efforts to construct public spheres are inextricably linked to place-making projects, whether at the local or regional scale. Such projects are expressive of a politics of place that seeks, on the one hand, to develop and defend place-based knowledges and identities and, on the other, to use these as a basis for engaging with wider publics. The place-based publics that these activists seek to construct have a clear *counterpublic* dimension, in the sense that they are about enabling subordinate groups to elaborate their own discourses. However, as they do not have a clear counterpart in the form of a general public at the same scale, such publics complicate conventional models of publics and counterpublics, as well as hierarchical ‘nested’ conceptions of scale. ‘Going global’ is not necessarily the primary objective of these activists, for whom other scales are equally or more important. Nonetheless, such place-based publics might be considered constitutive of a global WSF public

insofar as activists consciously seek to connect with struggles in other parts of the world and invoke a sense of connectedness to the WSF.

The initiatives discussed in Chapter 7 demonstrate in more explicit terms how communication technologies can be used to invoke a sense of participation in a global WSF public. For the proponents of these initiatives, making the WSF public involves using web tools to connect otherwise dispersed actors and making them feel part of the same 'subjective territory of communication', in the words of one activist. Here, extending the WSF public involves extending the affective experience of encounter beyond the face-to-face interactions that take place at social forum events. The use of videoconference technology to enable live audio-visual interactions might be conceived as a way to approximate the 'originary' model of publicness as involving face-to-face dialogue, thus enabling more unmediated forms of communication across distance. However, I suggest that the main significance of these practices lies in their capacity to generate a sense of identification with a global WSF process among actors who may well remain strongly connected to their localities. Such a sense of connectedness to the global may in turn be a resource for place-based actors, as shown in the case of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries where it was used by organisers to invoke a sense of Dunas as a place that is part of the global. While the notion of an 'expanded' social forum that was used in connection with the WSF 2009 implies extending the WSF public outwards from a 'centre' (the 'global public' gathered at the WSF), the adoption of this concept by place-based actors seeking to construct a network of peripheries might be conceived in terms of extending the WSF public 'from below'. Extending the WSF public, in this perspective, involves the proliferation of communication practices that enable place-based actors around the world to experience a sense of connection to the WSF.

In brief, this thesis demonstrates that there are many approaches to making the WSF public and many ways of making it global. These cannot easily be incorporated within a unified theoretical or normative model. If anything, the analysis presented in the previous five chapters makes clear that the practices and imaginaries of social movements are frequently ahead of existing theoretical frameworks. This highlights the need to exercise caution when seeking to comprehend such movements and maintain a reflexive awareness of the possibility that theoretical concepts may contain as well as elucidate their emancipatory potential. In this perspective, the absence of a well-defined theoretical model that can integrate the various communication practices discussed in this thesis is not so much a problem as a sign that efforts to understand these and similar practices need to attend closely to their historical contingencies and engage seriously with activists' own analyses.

The conception of publics as constituted through the circulation of discourse developed in Chapter 1 has been useful for gaining analytical purchase on questions about the significance of mediated communication in the WSF. However, the practices discussed in the previous five chapters also expose some of the limits of such a model, particularly in terms of what it can tell us about how the WSF public might be extended. A key premise of this thesis has been that the emancipatory potential of the WSF lies not so much in its capacity to expand the discursive boundaries of *general* publics, as in its ability to extend its *own* discursive boundaries. The case studies presented here raise questions about the extent to which it will succeed in doing so solely through the circulation of discourse in the form of media content. The conception of publics as constituted through the circulation of discourse makes clear that the boundaries of any public are determined by the reach of its discourse alone, and that individuals become members of a given public insofar as they identify as addressed by that discourse. In more concrete terms, this suggests that the potential of the WSF to extend its discursive

boundaries depends on the capacity of organisers and communication activists to produce attractive and convincing media messages, and to disseminate these widely. Though this surely is important and necessary, the difficulties involved in communicating the WSF via conventional mass media suggest that it cannot be the only strategy. Gaining visibility within mass mediated publics requires translating the discourses of WSF participants into a language that resonates with dominant news frames, which often involves distortion and simplification. Meanwhile, a more uncompromising approach, such as that adopted by alternative media activists who refuse to modify their coverage to resonate with hegemonic discourses, is faced with the problem that this coverage will mostly attract the attention of people who already in some way identify with the WSF.

This points towards an important role for the kind of movement-building approach developed by shared communication activists. Essentially, what this approach suggests is that constructing publics is not just a matter of circulating media content – it is about mobilising as many actors as possible to participate in the production of such content. This depends not just on the provision of technical tools (though this is a necessary condition) but on empowering groups and individuals to make use of such tools and laboriously constructing networks based on thick solidarity. While the face-to-face interactions made possible by social forum events are crucial to this, thick solidarity may also proliferate beyond physical gatherings as activists implement shared communication practices in their own contexts and construct their own publics at different scales.

The emphasis that most communication activists place on inclusion suggests that extending the WSF public is not only a matter of engaging with dominant publics. Equally important is extending the WSF public ‘from below’ by ensuring that currently marginal actors or emergent perspectives have a ‘way in’ to the WSF public – whether by providing documentation tools, by mobilising them to participate in communication, or by extending the affective

experience of encounter to those unable to travel. The limitations of the open space approach that were revealed in Chapter 4 suggest that if organisers and communication activists are to succeed in making the WSF public truly inclusive, a more proactive approach is required. This resonates with broader debates about the extent to which the open space of the WSF lives up to its own promise of openness. In brief, the WSF is not 'open' (or public) by default – it needs to be made so.

The case studies presented in this thesis demonstrate that making the WSF global is not just a matter of creating or influencing disembodied global communication networks. Nor does it mean constructing a global public sphere in the sense of a unified communication space at the global scale. Rather, constructing a global WSF public seems to require a plural and multi-scalar approach that matches the plural and multi-scalar character of the WSF process itself. This certainly involves disseminating content through the internet, but it equally requires internationally coordinated efforts to engage with national mediated publics, the construction of place-based yet networked publics at regional and local scales, and the reflexive use of communication technologies to invoke a sense of globality among place-based actors.

### ***Communication and knowledge production***

For the other possible world heralded by the WSF to become a reality, a fundamental transformation is needed in the way that the majority of people in the world think, feel, and act. A key premise of this thesis has been that media and communication, as a crucial component of movements' infrastructures for knowledge production and as the means by which knowledge may travel, are essential to such a transformation. How might the publics that forum organisers and communication activists seek to construct contribute to processes of knowledge production and to the epistemic project of

the WSF? To what extent might their communication practices help affirm the existence and validity of the WSF's multiple knowledges and enable pedagogical processes of translation?

Conventional mass media seem to offer the potential for making the knowledges and visions of the movements that participate in the WSF visible within general publics, in ways that a more dispersed medium like the internet is unable to. Given their symbolic power to construct social reality, gaining favourable coverage in mass media appears crucial to the success of the WSF. As we have seen, however, there are a number of obstacles to this – not least the media's tendency to frame issues in accordance with dominant worldviews, which means that subalternised and emergent knowledges are unlikely to be given a fair hearing. Moreover, the non-dialogic character of mass media means that their potential to facilitate translation and convergence is limited.

The initiatives discussed in Chapter 4 provide one example of efforts to facilitate more 'unfiltered' and dialogic forms of communication. Informed by a commitment to autonomy, respect for epistemic plurality, and resistance to hegemonic closure, these initiatives have been conceived by their proponents as a way to facilitate convergence and as a means to fulfil the WSF's promise of openness. However, the open space approach based on providing tools for WSF participants to document their own ideas and proposals has not succeeded in mobilising a critical mass of activists. This has been partly due to organisational shortcomings, but is also a consequence of the character of these tools themselves. In particular, the documentation projects appear to be rooted in a somewhat rationalist and procedural conception of knowledge production and convergence, which might have limited appeal within the WSF 'universe'. OpenFSM, meanwhile, requires a degree of connectedness and technological literacy that many actors within the WSF lack. With better coordination and promotion, combined with capacity-building to enable more actors to make use of them, such tools might become

important repositories for documentation about the WSF that can support knowledge production. However, by themselves they are perhaps unlikely to facilitate pedagogical processes of translation.

The practices developed by shared communication activists appear more promising in this respect. By adopting an explicitly partisan approach which nonetheless affirms the existence of multiple truths, shared communication initiatives have the potential to challenge both the truth-status of dominant media narratives and the myth of media impartiality itself. A key aim of the shared communication projects has been to express the epistemic plurality of the WSF. However, it is not only through the circulation of media content that shared communication might contribute to the epistemic project of the WSF. The collaborative practices that have been developed by activists also demonstrate the transformative potential of *processes* of media production. By providing spaces of sociality in which communicators from different movements are brought into contact with one another, the shared communication projects have the potential to facilitate processes of translation based on the mutual identification of differences and similarities. Such inter-movement learning might proliferate beyond the spaces of physical contiguity provided by social forums insofar as participants act as conduits of knowledge within their own networks. However, collaborative processes of media production that can facilitate translation require time and resources, which are often in short supply. Activists' commitment to exchange and learning often conflicts with the more immediate priority of producing and disseminating media coverage. For the movement-building approach to have a wider impact within and beyond the WSF, shared communication activists need to mobilise a critical mass of movement actors to participate in communication and assume it as part of their own agendas.

Chapter 6 demonstrates the importance of social movements appropriating communication media for their own purposes, not only

in order to disseminate their knowledges but in order to create conditions in which autonomous knowledge production becomes possible. Localised actors, whose knowledges have been rendered marginal and non-credible and who are excluded from dominant publics, require their own public spheres in which to elaborate and strengthen their visions. The place-based publics that communication activists in Belém seek to construct are not just sites of resistance; they are also about the construction of positive alternatives grounded in the realities and lived experience of people in the Amazon. Discernible in their communication practices are the contours of an epistemological imaginary in which place is central to the development of alternative knowledge projects. This suggests that the process of convergence that the WSF seeks to facilitate is not simply a matter of including 'local' actors within the 'global' WSF public. Given the unequal terrain on which movements within the WSF encounter one another, such actors risk being incorporated within existing discourses and political imaginaries unless they have their own public spheres for knowledge production.

The practices discussed in Chapter 7 provide further insights into how communication technologies might be used to connect place-based knowledges within globally distributed networks. The use of web tools to facilitate real-time audio-visual interactions across geographical distance offers place-based actors the opportunity to connect to global networks while remaining focused on their locality. Such connections are not just about information exchange; the affective experience of encounter that they make possible is also important in its own right. Such encounters have a strong pedagogical dimension, in the sense that they may facilitate deeper understanding of the cultural, social, and political contexts of 'distant others', and may contribute to building solidarity. The sense of globality engendered by such connections also can be a resource for localised actors, as shown in the case of the Expanded Social Forum of the Peripheries where organisers mobilised it as a means to

empower a process of social transformation grounded in place-based knowledges. As the 'glue' that links place-based actors and knowledges within a global framework, these communication practices demonstrate the importance of affect to the epistemic project of the WSF. Giving visceral content to the alternative epistemological imaginary put forward by the WSF, they may not only facilitate convergence between already-existing knowledges, but also give impetus to the proliferation of autonomous knowledge projects around the world.

Together, the case studies presented in this thesis paint a nuanced picture of the relationship between communication and knowledge production. A key insight emerging from the preceding discussion is that mediated communication can contribute to the epistemic project of the WSF not just through the circulation of media content, whether within mass mediated publics or movement networks, though this is clearly important. Equally significant are perhaps the more subtle processes by which communication can contribute to individual and collective empowerment, network-building, and translation when it becomes embedded in movement dynamics. In this respect, insights from the literature on alternative and citizens' media about the transformative potential of processes of media production are relevant not just in the context of local-scale initiatives but also to the construction of transnational movement networks. This thesis shows that it is necessary to pay close attention to what kinds of knowledge production, and by whom, different communication practices may enable or preclude. If the WSF is to become a truly global process, all of the actors that identify with its epistemic project need to be able to participate in the WSF public on their own terms.

### ***Possibilities for further research***

It has been clear from the outset that this thesis could only offer a partial account of media and communication in the WSF process. This is partly due to the complex and distributed character of the WSF itself, partly because of the fluid and constantly evolving nature of activist praxis, which means it inevitably outpaces academic knowledge production. Given the shortage of systematic analyses of media and communication in the WSF, I decided it was important to adopt an exploratory approach that took the practices, experiences, and reflections of organisers and communication activists as a starting point. The situated conversations that I have had with these actors have focused on their past experiences, current challenges, and the future possibilities of different communication practices. These conversations inevitably have drawn attention to certain contradictions and shortcomings, but also highlighted the potential of different uses of mediated communication. The critical account that I have presented in this thesis is offered in a spirit of solidarity, as a contribution to ongoing collective processes of reflection rather than a definitive account of media and communication in the WSF.

The strength of the particular vantage point provided by my primary research site in Belém was that it gave me access both to activists and organisers with long-term involvement in the WSF process *and* to the perspectives of newcomers. This enabled me to appreciate the origins and trajectories of many communication practices as well as what happens when the WSF arrives in a new location. The main disadvantage of my choice of field sites is perhaps that it reproduces the European-Brazilian bias that has characterised the WSF itself. An important task for further research would therefore be to explore the communication practices that have developed and are developing elsewhere in the world, particularly within the regional social forum processes in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Given the importance of place identified in this thesis, it also would be

important to explore the dynamics set in motion by the WSF when it arrives in different parts of the world, and the extent to which it is able to facilitate translation and give impetus to autonomous knowledge projects. Longer-term ethnographic studies of place-based communication practices, carried out in the aftermath of any given edition of the global WSF event, would be valuable in this respect.

As my main objective has been to conduct a detailed ethnographic exploration of communication practices, it has been beyond the scope of this thesis to systematically analyse media coverage of the WSF. Research into media representations of the WSF – whether ‘mainstream’ or ‘alternative’ – would complement my own study in important respects. Analyses of movement-based media coverage could help assess the *content* of the alternative imaginaries being developed within the WSF ‘universe’, the extent to which such coverage makes visible emergent and marginal perspectives, and the extent to which knowledges and visions developed within different political, cultural, and geographic contexts may overlap and converge. Analyses of mass media coverage, meanwhile, could provide important insights into the WSF’s degree of visibility within mediated publics, the ways in which its knowledges and visions are translated to meet dominant news criteria, and the extent to which it is able to influence hegemonic constructions of social reality. Though audience studies inevitably are limited in what they can tell us about the wider social impact of media representations, studies of how the readers, listeners, and viewers of such coverage interpret and relate it to their own social worlds may provide insights into the challenges and possibilities involved in efforts to engage with general publics beyond the ‘already converted’.

Finally, this thesis has highlighted the potential of a movement-building approach to extending the WSF public, which involves generating awareness among the movements that participate in the WSF of the transversal character of communication. Communication activists seek not only to produce coverage about social movements

or enable such movements to communicate on their own terms, but also to mobilise support for the substantive claims of their *own* movement. Social forums provide occasions for communication activists from around the world to come together not just to produce media coverage but to exchange experiences and discuss strategies with the aim of building a global grassroots movement for the democratisation of communication. This project was given impetus at the Dakar WSF in February 2011 with the Assembly on the Right to Communication which produced a declaration signed by 60 organisations and networks from around the world (Assembly on the Right to Communication, 2011). At the time of writing (September 2011), plans are in progress for a World Free Media Forum, connected to the WSF process, to be organised in 2012. An important area for further research would be to explore the development of this emergent movement, its links to other actors and initiatives in the area of communication policy and media reform advocacy, and – perhaps most importantly – the extent to which it is able to mobilise support for its vision within and beyond the WSF.

In the meantime, I hope this thesis will contribute to a better understanding, among activists and scholars alike, of the character and significance of mediated communication in the WSF process, the creativity and determination that communication activists apply in their efforts to extend the WSF public, and some of the challenges they face in doing so. It is my own contribution to making the WSF public and to ongoing processes of knowledge production about and for the construction of another world.

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