

Citizens and Activists:

Analysing the Reasons, Impact and Benefits of Civic Emails

Directed at a Grassroots Campaign

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ABSTRACT

Much has been said about the use of email and other ICTs by online activists to communicate their message to the general public, to recruit and mobilize fellow advocates, and to reach the mass media. However, largely absent from the literature are studies exploring the use of email by the public to communicate and interact with campaigners. This paper investigates why citizens email campaigners and whether email exchanges between the public and activists inform campaigning tactics. Data used in this article include the results of content analysis of the archive of an email list, participant observation and informal interviews with the grassroots activists of a Dutch single-issue campaign against black box electronic voting. The research shows that the possibility for citizens to communicate with a grassroots campaign has been beneficial for both the civic writer and the activists.

Keywords: civic writing, weak supporters, grassroots activism, email content analysis, campaign strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

Many political systems are troubled by declining political participation, civic engagement, and political trust (Nye, Zelikow & King 1997; Putnam 2000; Coleman 2004). Declining rates of electoral turnout in the past two decades, and a decline in membership of traditional representative organisations such as political parties and trade unions, has raised the question among scholars of whether information and communication technologies (ICTs) can enhance

political participation¹ (Lusoli & Ward 2003; Walch 1999; Ward et al. 2003; Putnam 2000) or facilitate new forms of political action (McCaughey & Ayers 2003; Van de Donk et al. 2004; Pickerill 2004).

Scholars like Norris (2002), Ward (2001) and Bimber (1998) point to this rise of alternative or new forms of political action and explain that the public is now more willing to support single issues campaigns and engage in unconventional forms of protest activity. According to Ward et al. (2003, p. 656) there are four reasons why single-issue campaigns are likely to be the main winners in the Internet era: (i) because of the direct style of Internet communications, people are more likely to engage individually or through more direct action, single issue organizations; (ii) single issue campaigns are more likely to experiment with the technology because of their non-hierarchical structures and flexibility; (iii) small fringe organizations are able to compete with major political players because producing a website carries relatively low costs, and email communication is cheap, effective and accessible; (iv) and finally the lack of editorial control on the web means that grassroots organizations can reach a much greater audience than through the traditional press or television and radio.

Even though there seems to be a greater willingness of people to support grassroots campaigns, and ICTs make it easier to reach them, getting citizens to actually actively participate in political action is not easy (Oegema & Klandermans, 1994). There are different theories that explain participation in movements. The Resource Mobilization (RM) theory for instance argues that participation depends on the costs and rewards available (Gamson 1975; McCarthy & Zald 1977). These rewards are divided in three types: solidary incentives (emotional rewards, group reinforcement); material incentives (money, goods, services); and purposive incentives (the belief that acts are effective). The RM theory has been criticized for not explaining individual choices, for not giving sufficient weight to grievances and for viewing incentives and resources alone as sufficient causes (Ennis & Schreuer 1987: 394). New, more social-psychological, theories have build on the RM theory by also considering individual attitudes and social factors. By looking at individual cost-benefit calculations, and by examining attitudes such as shared grievances, efficacy and social cost, scholars hope to get a clearer idea of the reasons for people to participate in political action.

While researchers use different sets of factors to investigate what leads individuals to participate in campaigns, most of them point to the importance of efficacy (e.g. Schussman and Soule 2005; Kahne and Westheimer 2006; Ennis and Schreuer 1987; Barkan 2004). Usually a distinction is made between internal and external efficacy. Internal political efficacy refers to a person's sense of his or her own ability to participate effectively in the political process, while external efficacy reflects perceptions of governmental and institutional responsiveness to citizens' needs and demands. A sense of political efficacy is a key building block for civic commitment (Eyler and Giles 1999) and has generally been found to have a positive relationship to political activity (Kahne and Westheimer 2006: 292).

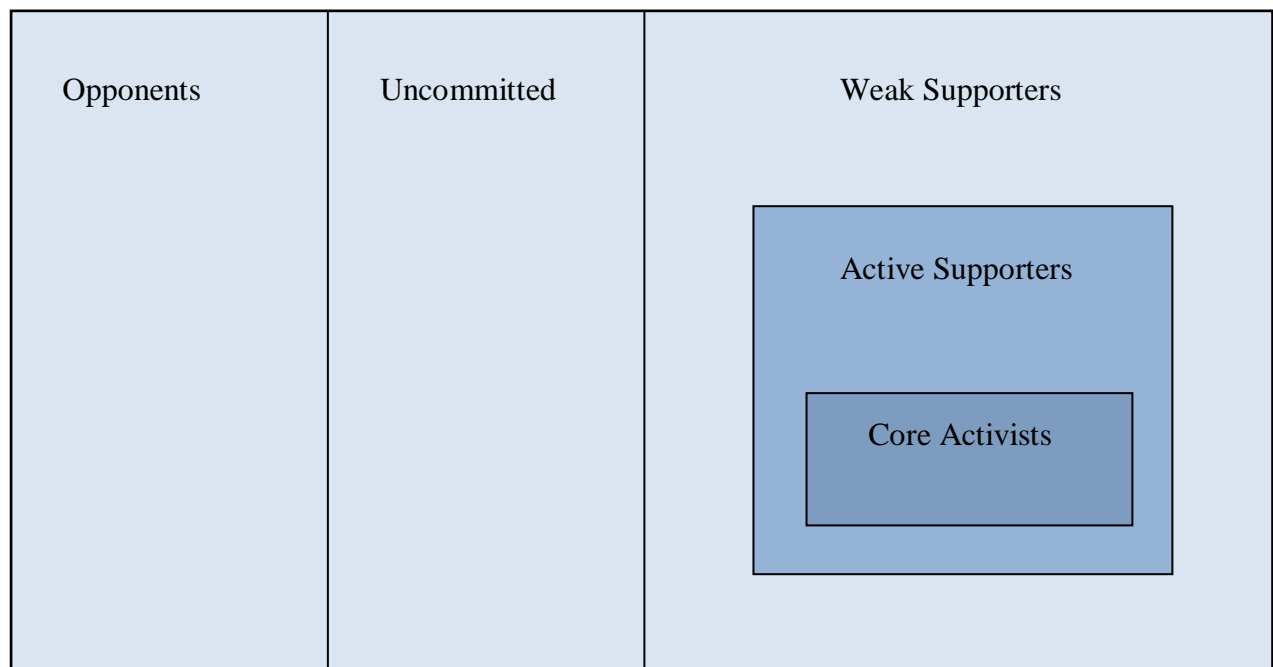


Fig. 1 Levels of support (adapted from Ennis & Schreuers, 1987)

Among those who participate in political action or those who share the same campaign goals and beliefs there is a graduated scale of engagement levels (see Figure 1). First of all there is a small group of highly committed *core activists* who plan and implement the actions. Then there is a larger group of *active supporters* who turn up at meetings, who get involved in collective actions, who donate money, or who volunteer time to certain sub-task within a campaign. Finally, there is a large group of supporters who endorse the campaign goals and objectives, but who do not participate on its behalf or give only minimal support. Ennis and Schreuers called these *weak supporters*, a term adopted here. This last group of peripheral supporters has had little attention in

the literature hitherto. Ennis and Schreuers explain the factors that account for the neglect of this group: 'By its nature it tends to be voiceless. Movement leaders and organizations are more visible than the rank and file, and donations to a cause are more easily measured than the spread of its ideology. Weak support is also ephemeral: until demonstrated, it can be denied or ignored by opponents' (1987: 392).

This paper builds on the work of Ennis & Schreuers (1987) who claim that 'weak supporters' were unjustly neglected in the social movement literature. Bimber (2003) states that in the past weak supporters, or as he calls it 'transient' supporters, were not highly prized by interest groups. Both activists and scholars have concentrated mainly on actors with relatively high levels of commitment who contributed time, labour or money to a campaign. However, Ennis and Schreuer (1987: 391-392) emphasize that 'less intensive support within the constituency is more pervasive and potentially as important'. They argue that the importance of weak supporters lies in their function to provide legitimacy to the movement and in demonstrating the movements' power to potential converts, opponents, and third parties. Also, weak support is more widespread than active support and has therefore a greater ability to reach the uncommitted beyond "movement circles". And finally, weak supporters can supply new resources if their levels of commitment can be raised. Although the authors' research focused on levels of commitment to social movements, it is possible to apply their conceptual framework to the study of single-issue interest groups: as Chadwick (2006) and others (see for instance Burstein and Linton 2002) point out, the boundaries between social movements and interest groups have blurred in the last decade and the clear distinction in terms of their goals, tactics, constituencies of support, and policy impact have been converging.

Barkan (2004) makes a distinction between ideological support and practical support. We argue that the use of ICT makes it easier for ideological (i.e. weak) supporters to get politically involved and become more practical supporters at little cost to them. One of the easiest ways for weak supporters to get involved with a grassroots campaign is by sending email to activists. Sending email is a small-scale act of support which hardly requires any resources. It is a low-cost means which gives people the opportunity to voice their support or contribute in other ways. In this paper we focus on email messages sent by weak supporters to activists.

Most research has focused on how new technology has facilitated communication from grassroots campaigners to citizens, but not communication in the other direction. Email lists form a key method of communication for protest organizations. Email is part of the activist's 'cyber-toolkit', as Wall calls it, used to mobilize and educate movement actors by providing constantly updated information, as well as easing many logistical communication tasks (Wall 2007, p. 260). Ward et al. describe that 'From an organisational perspective, the Internet and email offer additional opportunities for more efficient recruitment and mobilisation' (2003, p. 653). They point out that email has helped to coordinate and mobilize protest quickly, making it easier for organizations to target supporters and sympathizers by sending information, requests for donations, membership application forms and renewal requests. Yet, the emphasis in research is mostly on emails directed from the organization to the public; little has been said about the opportunities for the public to email the organization. The interesting question whether the public communicates with campaigners, and if so, for what reasons, remains unanswered. In this paper I examine whether people in the Internet age are engaged in political writing, or as Stotsky (1987) calls it, 'civic writing', by examining all the emails sent by citizens to the general 'info' email address of a single-issue campaign. I will investigate the reasons why citizens (both weak supporters and opponents) most frequently used email to communicate with the activists. Furthermore, I will examine whether the emails from this group of weak supporters influenced the tactics of the activists in any way, thereby contributing to the success of the campaign.

This paper begins by presenting an introduction to the Dutch campaign "Wij vertrouwen stemcomputers niet" ("We do not trust voting computers"). It then focuses on the different uses of email within the campaign, followed by a brief methodological section. The remainder of the paper examines the info emails sent by weak supporters to the campaigners, identifying the reasons why people use email to communicate to "Wij vertrouwen stemcomputers niet" and the influence it might have had on the strategy and tactics of the activists.

2. THE GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGN

Context

Electronic voting computers have been in use for over 20 years in the Netherlands. At the beginning of 2006 almost the entire voting population used e-voting computers to cast their ballots. The introduction of this technology was not preceded by any public debate. Although a

number of individuals (citizens, scholars and some politicians) posed critical questions about the security, transparency and verifiability of the used e-voting systems, government always brushed these concerns aside.

In March 2006, Amsterdam became the last major city in the Netherlands to switch from traditional paper ballot voting to electronic voting. In response to this, several Amsterdam residents came together, to voice their concerns about the risks of the e-voting systems in use. They considered that the lack of transparency and the inability to undertake a recount were such a grave breach of the democratic electoral process that an organised form of protest was needed, and they started the campaign named “Wij vertrouwen stemcomputers niet” (WVSN).

Structure of the Group

Within a few weeks the activists had put the issue of the security and verification of e-elections firmly on the political agenda. In July 2006 the campaign gained momentum with an information rich website and considerable media attention. This is when the team introduced an ‘info’ mailing list for citizens to contact the group. Over the course of 18 months the core group of activists became an official foundation and grew in crew membership from 4 to 13 people. The members all had different backgrounds and skills. WVSN included software engineers, a social scientist, some ICT consultants, hackers, a constructional engineer, a Freedom of Information (FoIA) specialist, and others. Two team members worked full-time on the project while the rest of the activists devoted much of their spare time to the work (often resembling an extra full-time job, in terms of hours spent). Around the core activists there was a group of about 50 active supporters. This group supported the campaign by investing either time, money and/or labour.²

The work by the team was not steered in a top-down fashion; instead WVSN was a distributed team of networked individuals, facilitated by the use of ICTs. There was no clear task allocation and team members offered to take on the work they enjoyed and were able to do. As the project evolved over time, new tasks would come up for which team members would volunteer. Tasks would also be initiated by individual members, leading to a new direction in the approach or research. Some tasks were undertaken in turn by different members (responding to the incoming ‘info’ emails, updating the website, giving lectures, etc.), while other tasks were so specialised that only the hackers or the FoIA expert knew how to handle them. This departure from the established “top-down” model, in which initiatives originate at the top of a hierarchal system to then be driven downwards, reflected the belief that motivated people with diverse skills and

interests will organize themselves and the division of work, especially when there is a clear common goal to achieve.

The activists' work was substantial and resulted amongst other things in an extensive online library³, a hack of the most used voting computer in the Netherlands, an academic peer-reviewed publication of the hack (Gonggrijp & Hengeveld, 2007), meetings with politicians, civil servants, and policy makers, and court cases against the state and the e-voting vendor. Parliamentary questions were asked, short-term adjustments were made to the voting systems, and two independent committees were established by government to investigate the electoral process, ultimately leading to the decertification of all voting computers in the Netherlands in October 2007.

3. THE USES OF EMAIL FOR CAMPAIGNING

New technologies are increasingly being used for progressive social, cultural and political change (Walch 1999; Meikle 2002). As Meikle notes: 'We heard how the Net would transform politics, revitalising civic debate, political participation and public life' (2002, p. 28). Optimists do indeed think that Internet technologies can both broaden and deepen public participation in political matters (Van Aelst & Walgrave 2002) while pessimistic observers suggest that the Internet does not guarantee grassroots participation or more widespread democracy (McChesney 1998). Social movements, citizen-based organisations and grassroots campaigns use ICTs as a means for strengthening their work and gaining influence in politics. Although the activists applied a multitude of ICT tools, in this paper we focus solely on the use of emails which played an important role within the WWSN campaign. Literature on online activism points out that email is the perfect vehicle for cheap, fast and efficient one-to-many communication (Osler & Hollis 2001, p. 125; Ward et al. 2003). As Meikle puts it: 'If there is a killer app for Internet politics, then it's email' (2002, p. 14). Five different methods of using email were employed by the WWSN team.

Newsletters

The distribution of electronic newsletters kept the 1,301 subscribers up-to-date on what the group was doing, and about upcoming events. It also kept people informed about the e-voting situation in the Netherlands and in other countries, and the reactions of both the government and the e-voting vendors to the campaign. Newsletter items were backed up with a number of links to the

original documents. The newsletters were not only received by citizens but also by journalists, people from several Dutch ministries, and the vendors of the Dutch voting computers. The fact that the activists received a lot of reactions to the newsletters showed that the information sent out in this way was actually digested by a large part of the audience and was not 'just passed over like so much junk mail' (Myers 1994, p. 253).

Press Releases

Thirteen press releases were sent to a list of journalists, tv and radio news bulletins and relevant organizations, and subsequently archived on the campaign website.⁴ One of the team members had built strong relationships with journalists from his previous job as a digital civil rights defender and sent the press releases to a list of about 50 addresses with an emphasis on IT journalists and Internet media. Press releases were also sent to several national news agencies (ANP, GDP, Novum).

Later in the campaign, the press strategy changed and press releases were discontinued. All the news was presented in the newsletter to which many journalists had subscribed. Particularly important news was given directly to one particular journalist depending on where the team thought it would have the biggest impact. The advantage of this approach was that the team could make an agreement about the moment of publication. Another reason to change their strategy was that later on in the campaign the news items became more complex and were accompanied by a lot of (FoIA) documents. Because of this complexity it made more sense to choose one particular journalist to give the entire file to. Rucht (2004) describes these means to influence the public visibility via the mass media: '[protest groups] can try to establish continuous relationships with certain media and/or certain journalists; they can privilege some journalists by providing background information; they can facilitate the journalists' jobs by preparing well-crafted press releases and/or offering contacts to particular spokespeople, specialists, etc' but argues that the effect of such strategies is usually limited because 'protest groups seldom possess information that journalists desperately seek' (Rucht 2004, p. 33). In the WWSN case the information the activists provided was often very interesting for journalists because it was obtained by several Freedom of Information Requests from local and national government and contained previously unknown and sometimes shocking data⁵.

Discussion Mailing List

A discussion list was used to stimulate debate between its 162 members. To become a member one could subscribe to the list without requiring approval from the list owner. Messages sent to the discussion list were received by all members and also archived on the website by thread, subject, author and date. On some discussion lists, messages must be approved by a moderator before being sent to the rest of the subscribers, this was not the case for the WVSN list. Despite the fact that the messages were not monitored the posts were courteous, on topic and showed on average a high quality.

Crew Mailing List

Starting out in May 2006 with only four members, messages between the activists were first sent to the individual email addresses. In July 2006 the team started to use an internal 'crew' emailing list to facilitate collaboration. A total of 2,114 crew emails were sent in the first 18 months of the campaign. The messages between the members were used to debate strategy and tactics; to point out important issues; and facilitated decision-making and the division of work. But it also helped to develop and maintain group culture, and improved group commitment. The tone of the emails was informal, with many jokes, personal information and emotional support interspersed with the more serious and task-oriented messages (Vasileiadou & Oostveen, forthcoming).

Info Mailing List

Finally, the activists created an 'info' email address by which anybody could contact them, and which was publicised on the website and in the newsletters. Most of the core activists received all the incoming info emails. An individual reply would be sent (often within hours of receiving the message) by the person most capable of providing an answer. This bottom-up approach worked well and only occasionally would an info email not receive an answer. Many of the emails sent by the public contained useful links and documents, or expressions of support. The senders would receive a personalised acknowledgment, but no copy was sent to the rest of the info list subscribers (i.e. the crew). For emails which required a more substantial answer, the reply would be copied to the info list so that the other activists would be aware how the message had been seen to. Sometimes emails were answered so quickly that the sender would receive several replies from different crew members simultaneously. During really busy periods in the campaign (for instance, during the weeks of reverse engineering the voting computers) one or two members

would take on the task of responding to the ‘info’ emails, and only forward the important replies to the rest of the group.

		[Newsletters]	[Discussion list]	[Press]	[Crew list]	[Info list]
2006	July	2	451	1	56	160
	August	1	109	-	178	137
	September	2	196	-	116	131
	October	3	490	6	291	482
	November	3	684	1	271	386
	December	2	44	-	69	57
2007	January	6	122	1	229	97
	February	3	106	1	115	47
	March	3	91	1	87	77
	April	2	32	-	54	31
	May	2	52	1	186	47
	June	2	29	1	100	35
	July	-	25	1	23	14
	August	-	17	-	24	13
	September	2	125	-	110	57
	October	4	44	-	87	69
	November	2	19	-	43	28
	December	2	7	-	75	21
	TOTAL	41	2673	13	2114	1889

Table 1 Different uses of email in the campaign

4. METHODOLOGY

The research in this paper is part of a larger study looking at a single-issue grassroots campaign against unverifiable electronic voting in the Netherlands. Having been involved in a European research project on remote electronic voting systems, I became increasingly more aware of, and consequently more concerned about, the verifiability and security issues surrounding the voting computers used in my own country. It led me to become one of the four founders and a board member of the WWSN foundation. I contributed content to the campaign website, and was involved in discussing tactics and strategy. I was present at court cases, and meetings with government officials. I wrote articles for newspapers, and helped out with more practical direct action.

Similar to the work of Pickerill (2003) I have been using my research as a way to aid the campaign and thus directly interfered in the dynamics I was exploring. I have tried to combine reflexive methodological practice with action-oriented research ‘that seeks to “change the landscape” rather than just survey and map it’ aiming to bring social relevance to my work. As Pickerill points out: ‘such research becomes about honesty, responsibility, and sharing; being honest about one’s position and what you intend to use the research for.’ This direct participation from the very start of the campaign gave me unique access to crucial components of the data-set that would otherwise have not been possible. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with participants form part of the empirical work. In addition, content analysis of internal and external emails and content analysis of the campaign website was carried out. Newspaper articles and other publications were also studied. The part of the study reported here deals with the use of email by the activists, and more specifically, the emails received from weak supporters.

The Internet - and emailing lists in particular - makes interactions between people accessible for qualitative research. Eysenbach and Wyatt distinguish three types of *Internet-based research* methods: passive analysis where researchers study discussion groups or emailing lists without involving themselves; active analysis in which researchers participate in the communications; and finally studies where the researchers identify themselves and gather information in the form of online interviews, focus groups or surveys (in Eysenbach & Till 2001). This study falls under the active analysis method where the researcher participated in the communication, receiving and sometimes replying to the incoming emails. With agreement from the other team members, this active involvement resulted in access to the archives of all the emailing lists used by the grassroots campaign. The material used has been anonymised, protecting confidentiality.

This paper relies on the analysis of emails sent to the info@wijvertrouwenstemcomputersniet.nl address over the course of 18 months. A qualitative content analysis of the complete archive of email communications between the public and the activists was performed. A total of 1889 info email messages were collected. Of these emails, 1515 were sent by citizens and 374 were copied replies by the activists to these emails. Messages were coded across domains as message type, message tone (formal, informal, courteous), gender, and sender (unique or recurrent, anonymous

or not). The following 9-category scheme was used for coding the message types: fan mail, opposition, information request, information provision, strategy input, volunteers, discussion, complaints, and off topic.

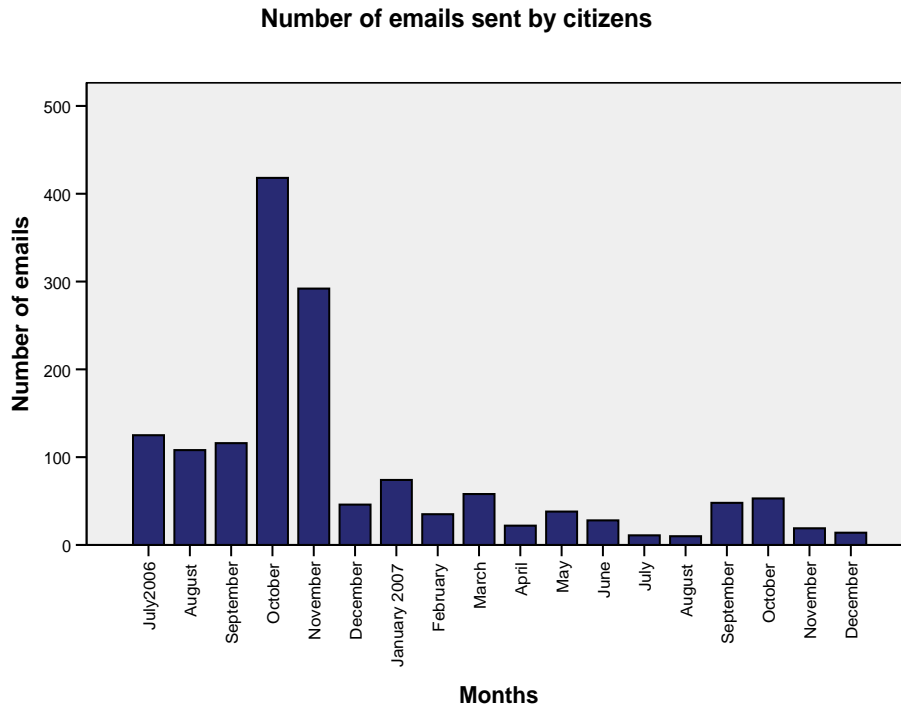


Fig. 2 Amount of citizen’s emails collected and analysed, July 2006 - December 2007 (N=1515)

Figure 2 shows that most of the emails were sent in the first five months of the campaign. Peaks and valleys in the flow of the emails relate to media attention and actions undertaken by the campaigners. In the following section I will first present the reasons why citizens contacted the activists. Then I will present the results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis on the strategy input of info emails.

5. RESULTS

When analysing an email archive like the info mailing list used by the WVSN campaigners, the first question to ask is who the senders of the emails are and for what purposes they most frequently used email to communicate with the activists. As Sussmann (1959) points out, a disadvantage of mail is that the recipient has little information about who is writing it. No social, economical or demographic variables are known, except for the gender of the writers. In the WVSN case study the majority of messages were sent by men: only 12.5 per cent of the emails

were written by women and in 5.5 per cent the gender is unknown. In most cases this did not mean that the email had been sent anonymously, but merely that the sender had used only a surname. When we look at the data from a political participation perspective, the gender difference is remarkable since research has shown that the gender gap in both conventional and unconventional political participation that favours men has narrowed or even disappeared over the last decades (Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Barkan 2004). However, the domination of email communication by men is in line with work by Greene and Kirton (2003, p. 325) who, drawing on Herring, point out that previous research looking at email discussion groups amongst academics finds that just like conventional public forums, computer-mediated interaction is largely dominated by men.⁶

Overall, messages sent to the info address were coherent, relevant and opinionated. Very few included offensive content. Most of the emails came from concerned citizens, but the group also received messages from politicians and journalists. Nine main reasons for people to send an email to the info address can be identified from the data set (see Table 2)⁷. Some emails had a dual purpose (for instance fan mail *and* provision of information).

	Content of emails	Frequency	Percent	Effort
1	Information provision	643	42.4	Medium
2	Fan mail	336	22.8	Low
3	Information request	175	11.5	Low
4	Discussion/Solutions	151	10	High
5	Strategy input	103	6.8	High
6	Volunteers	67	4.4	Medium - High
7	Complaints	62	4.1	Low
8	Off topic	57	3.8	Low
9	Opposition	28	1.8	Low

Table 2 Content of info emails (N=1515)

An ‘info’ email address is intended as a means to obtain information, and to seek clarification on all sorts of issues. In the case of the WVSN campaign 11.5 per cent of the emails were from citizens asking questions. About 1 per cent of these emails came from abroad and was sent by fellow activists who needed help with their own campaigns against ‘black box’ voting. They

would request the hackers within the group to try and hack the systems used in their own countries. Yet this demand for explanations, help and information was not the main reason people used the info email address as the following sections will show. The sections can be seen as incremental in 'costs' or effort involved for the senders. While fan mail, complaints, and off-topic emails require relatively minimal effort; and emails providing information, and some practical help require a medium level of effort; extensive emails providing significant practical help, solutions and strategic input show relatively high costs (i.e. time, money, and action) involved. From our data we learn that only 19 per cent of the emails sent required the higher level of effort.

Proponents versus Opponents

Over the first 18 months of the campaign a large amount of 'fan' mail was received by the campaigners. A total of 336 emails with explicit declarations of support were sent. Although emails from the public are an important source of information about the state of public opinion - just like blogs, opinion polls and reactions to newspaper articles - it is hard to tell how accurately the info emails in the WWSN case reflected the general opinion about the vulnerability of voting computers and hence the importance of the campaign to the Dutch public at large.

From the content analysis of the emails we learn that only a very small percentage (1.8%) held views in opposition to those of the campaigners. If we would base our insight of the public opinion on solely the info emailing list it would seem that from the start almost everybody agreed with the activists and spurred them on in their quest to abolish the voting computers. However, especially in the beginning of the campaign there were a lot of negative remarks about the campaign on weblogs and online forums. Reactions to online newspaper articles about the campaign show far more opposing views, sometimes quite aggressively. On the Net the activists were accused of being Luddites and of wasting their time. Why is it then that we hardly see this opposing view reflected in the info emails?

We know from other studies that the relative anonymity of computer mediated communication makes it easy for people to send emails with strongly opposing views: these emails could be expected to be aggressive in tone. However, in this case aggressive and negative emails are the exception. There might be several explanations. First of all, sending an email is an individualistic action and it might be easier to voice a strong opinion when you see it backed-up by other similar opinions. This is what happens on online forums where one may meet divergent views of which

some may represent your own opinion. Secondly, letter writers have the tendency to send mail when they think their 'side' is losing, but not when they think it is winning: 'If the outcome appears safe, there is no need to act' (Sussman 1959, p. 210). When the group of activists took on the fight against voting computers that had been in use for over 20 years, it seemed unlikely that they could win the battle. They operated from an underdog position which could explain why so many weak supporters felt compelled to send encouraging and supporting emails. Finally, Sussmann argues 'Letter writers often, perhaps usually, prefer to lend support to representatives of their own position rather than to write critical mail to representatives of the opposition' (ibid., p. 209). Although her observation that there is a preference of letter writers for lending support rather than attacking is based on letters to politicians in the 1950s it still seems to hold true for writers of political emails in the current era.

Complaints

Most of the complaints received by email were of a technical nature. The majority of the complaints were easy to solve as they referred to broken links, the website being down, missing pages, forgotten wiki passwords, or documents which could not be opened. As the website grew in size, it became apparent that it was increasingly more difficult to find documents. Users would email the group saying that they had read something on the website some time ago but were not able to retrieve it. This problem was solved by making the entire content of the website (including the PDF documents) searchable.⁸

A number of people had problems with the newsletter and discussion mailing lists. They found them too complex, didn't understand the replies from the English software they received after registering, or didn't know how to unsubscribe. In one case someone complained that an unknown person was trying to subscribe him to the newsletter. As a solution the activists would subscribe or unsubscribe the senders directly.

Another reason for complaints was the online shop where one could buy merchandise relating to the campaign. The most heard complaint was the fact that not everybody has a credit card or is willing to use it for purchases online. The activists reacted to these complaints by offering to buy the products for the sender. A question which was asked several times was why the campaign didn't use a shop in the Netherlands so that buyers wouldn't have to pay a lot of extra money for postage and packaging. The online shop was based in the US and was chosen because of its ease

of use, offering print-on-demand technology. In reply to this grievance the activists would ask the senders to find a better alternative and let them know about it. No alternatives were offered by the emailers.

One of the more serious complaints received had to do with a breach of privacy. The activists had made extensive use of the Freedom of Information Act, requesting information from local and national government. The agencies should have anonymised the documents before disclosing the information to the campaign. However, this was not done in all of the cases. Upon receiving the documents, they were routinely scanned and put on the wiki before the activists had gone through them in detail. Part of trying to involve the public was to give them access to the new material and let them discover interesting facts themselves. Unfortunately this meant that FoIA documents received from the Municipality of Amsterdam still contained phone numbers and addresses of people which had not been blacked out by the responsible civil servants. Even though the responsibility lies with the sender, the activists apologized for not having checked the (hundreds of) pages thoroughly before putting them online, and made sure all the personal details were from then on blacked out.

Off Topic

There are always people who will use a public email address to send irrelevant, off topic, or crank emails. In the WWSN case nearly 4 percent of the emails could be classified as off topic. Many off topic emails were from people seeking help with other security and privacy issues they were concerned about. One example of a system that causes a lot of worries and which generated many emails to the campaign is the DigiD (Digital Identity) card, a system shared between governmental agencies, allowing them to digitally authenticate the identity people applying for an online transaction service. Other applications initiated by the government that caused concerns among Dutch citizens included the biometric passport, the OV-chip card for public transport, and the Electronic Patient Dossier (EPD) solution for the Dutch healthcare system. Because the campaign against the voting computers managed to put the issue of insecure and unverifiable e-elections on the political agenda within weeks of setting up their website, people thought that the activists could help to address other topics as well and gain both public and political attention in an equally short time. The activists would explain that they were a single-issue campaign and did not have the time or knowledge to focus on other issues besides e-voting.

Besides receiving off topic emails with genuine concerns about other new technologies, there were also emails from less level-headed people which the activists themselves filed under the category 'nutters'. They even dedicated a section on their Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page to it:

'QUESTION: I'm really into conspiracy theories. This whole voting computer thing is obviously a plot. Just like the Mossad killed Pim Fortuyn. Can I join you before the aliens on Area 51 take over?

*ANSWER: No. We realize full well that the topic of voting on computers attracts people also working on brain manipulation from satellites, crop circles, new theories for the JFK assassination and God knows what. We're not into that, and we don't want to be associated with it either.'*⁹

Information Provision

The most common reason for people to send an email to the campaigners was to provide unsolicited information. Even though the activists used a wiki, which allowed people to add their own links and make changes to the existing text, a lot of people sent their contributions by email. The information ranged from links to interesting websites and articles, to personal stories about mishaps at polling stations. Besides emails from the general public, WVSN also received messages from journalists informing them that they were writing an article about the campaign. These emails would often include a PDF of the article to be uploaded on the website. Furthermore, politicians emailed the group to tell them they were asking questions about the voting machines, often attaching the list of questions they had submitted to local or national government.

Volunteering

There are many ways in which people can contribute to a campaign. In the info emails we see a great diversity in the offers of help and the amount of effort and time people are willing to invest. The most basic help offered was the simple act of placing banners and links to the campaign website on personal sites and blogs, or offering money donations (only three times). More work was involved in writing articles about the campaign and posting these on blogs or sending them to local newspapers, or writing letters of complaint to the Minister of Interior Affairs and the vendor of the voting computers. The emails also show that many professionals offered their services and skills. IT experts volunteered technical support and expertise. This help was

appreciated, but not necessary given the technical skills and resources of the core activists. Academics (from for instance departments of Informatics, Organisation Studies, Law & ICT, Communication Studies, and Political Sciences) offered to write articles. Politicians proposed to ask questions at their local council meetings. And citizens offered to spread the word, as this quote illustrates:

*Good luck with your campaign. I will spread the message whenever I can.
Today the taxi-driver was the victim, and this weekend I'll tackle the football
canteen.*
W. 05/10/2006

This 'spreading the word' is one example of weak supporters touching the uncommitted, providing a channel for persuasion and conversion beyond movement circles (Ennis & Schreuer 1987).

As already mentioned, a number of people got involved in working on the wiki website. Others started translating parts of the website to German or English. Parts of the newsletters were also translated and even the cartoon that featured on the website was translated in English, German and Italian (Figure 3).



Fig. 3 Cut-out of the cartoon in three languages (Cartoon by K. Hottentot, R. Gonggrijp, B. Wels and A. Swiecky)

The text of the cartoon was adjusted to the situation in the different countries. The local context was reflected in the names of the characters and the opening hours of the polling stations.

Discussion and Alternative Solutions

From the start of the campaign the activists consistently took the position that it would be best to return to pencil and paper ballots for voting, instead of designing a better electronic voting system. Their logo also reflected that idea and on their website they stated: ‘We do not remember any news items about the great ballot-counting crisis. Voting computers are at best a problematic non-solution of a non-problem’. In their FAQ section they explain that it might be possible to build secure voting computers, but that: ‘whichever system is used, the problem of people depending on software that only a few understand remains’.



Fig. 4 The campaign logo (by K. Hottentot and A. Springborn)

Not everybody agreed with this view and the info mailing list received 151 emails discussing this position and describing other ways to automate elections. Some senders described complex systems involving cryptography and complex algorithms; while others simply explained that a paper trail would provide all the transparency needed. Many people came up with the same solutions and these were not always well-thought through. The activists took these discussions seriously and responded to the emails with an explanation about why they thought the proposed systems were not the ultimate solution to the problem.

Strategic Input

The last emails to be discussed are those that provided strategical or tactical input. In his book ‘On War’ von Clausewitz (1976) explains that there is a hierarchical relationship between strategy and tactics, whereby tactics is a means to strategy, and strategy in turn is a means to politics. In other words, tactics are used to win the battle, while strategy is the combination of all these battles to win the war. As Pattakos puts it: ‘Tactics are the day-to-day actions of any strategy or campaign within that strategy’ (1989, p. 102).

Nearly seven percent of the emails received by the WVSN group contained an element of strategic or tactical input. In the remaining section of the paper some examples are given of the tactical suggestions citizens sent to the activists. Did these electronic interactions between the public and the campaigners have any influence on the tactics of the activists? And if so, did these emails contribute to the success of the campaign?

All of the strategic and tactical input was taken into consideration and discussed among the core activists. Sometimes the input would lead to new tactics and actions, other times the activists would have a - in their opinion - valid reason to dismiss the suggestions. In this case they would reply to the sender with an explanation why they thought certain input would not be beneficial to the campaign. Input was always discussed by the entire core group of activists, but there was a tacit understanding that the most experienced and knowledgeable person with respect to a certain topic would have more weight in the decision making process. This implicit form of 'distributed power' functioned well.

Quite a few writers wanted the campaign to change their website URL into something shorter and easier to type. However, the long URL www.wijvertrouwenstemcomputersniet.nl was a conscious tactical decision and seemed to stick into people's minds. The activists never used the abbreviation WVSN as I have done in this paper and new crew members would be explicitly warned against this faux pas.

Several people emailed the group to ask them why they did not provide a petition on the campaign website which could be handed to the Minister of Internal Affairs, the European Parliament or the media. The emailers were of the opinion that a long list of signatures from Dutch citizens would build a case for change by proving the campaign had the support of a significant number of people. The activists however thought that unless the petition received a significant number of signatures it would sooner hinder than help the cause. Active measures such as petitioning can be effective, but also face a problem: because of the 'cost' involved of signing a petition it will draw smaller numbers of active supporters rather than larger numbers of weak ones (Ennis and Schreuer 1987). It is difficult to decide how many signatures would constitute a large enough support base in the eyes of government; if that number was not reached the petition could actually backfire. Therefore it was decided not to have a petition.

Three weeks before the national election on 22 November 2006 the activists threatened Dutch government with a preliminary injunction in the hope that the judge would give a provisional judgment about the e-voting system in use, granting an order to go back to pencil and paper. However, the Minister of Interior Affairs decided to have short-term adjustments made to the voting systems, making them legally acceptable for the impending election. After quite some internal debate the campaigners decided that it would only cause chaos and mayhem if they would continue with the preliminary injunction. They felt that although the short-term ‘patches’ were nothing more than band-aids, they indicated that the Minister acknowledged the problems with the voting systems and showed he was willing to make changes. The activists reasoned that if they lost the court case they would also lose credibility and support, while if they won, the same would apply (alienating politicians and citizens alike), because all the polling stations in the Netherlands would only have a couple of weeks to re-organise their election; an almost impossible task. After broadcasting this decision in a press release and the newsletter, a large number of emails were sent to the activists trying to convince them to change their tactics. The writers urged the activists to continue with their court case. They were convinced the group had been pressured by either the government or the secret service in dropping the case and were disappointed about the decision, feeling that the activists lacked guts and were marginalising the problems. Although it wasn’t a popular decision not to play it ‘hard’, the activists thought that in order to accomplish their long term objective it would be the best strategy to withdraw this particular case. They did proceed with other court cases¹⁰.

Another tactic suggested by several emailers was to build an alternative e-voting system. They felt that it should be possible for the activists to build a transparent system that would provide a paper trail and therefore enable a recount. Their main argument was that it would give the campaign more credibility. As one emailer put it: ‘To complain about something without offering an alternative is not the answer in my opinion’. However, the activists felt it wasn’t their task to come up with another e-voting solution. Although it would be possible to build a better system than the one in use, the group thought they had already emphasised the perfect alternative: pencil and paper. Not only did they believe that not every system needs to be automated; it would also make them less independent in their campaign.

Although the above mentioned tactical suggestions were not followed up by the activists they were still considered to be useful input because they stimulated the discussions about campaign strategy and tactics among the core activists.

However, there were also suggestions sent in by the public that were indeed used for the campaign. One of the tactics proposed was to try and hack a voting computer. These writers did of course not know that the activists had already managed to buy a voting computer and were hard at work re-engineering the system. There were many small tactical suggestions sent to the campaign. For instance, one emailer pointed the activists in the direction of the wikiscanner (a tool that lists anonymous wikipedia edits from interesting organizations) and provided the campaign with another good media opportunity. He showed that the vendor of the Dutch e-voting computers had made some changes to the English wiki subject 'electronic voting'. While the original text about a pilot with the voting computers in Italy read as follows: 'Italy experimented in the 2006 elections with electronic voting machines from Nedap but decided against it, believing that voting physically is less easy to falsify', the vendor (anonymously) turned it into: 'Italy experimented in the 2006 elections with electronic voting machines from Nedap and the pilot went very well. Cremona Municipality was very satisfied'. The activists used this information in their newsletter and it was picked up by the media.

Another important suggestion was made by someone who felt that sometimes the tone of the newsletters was too tendentious and roused public sentiment. He argued that it undermined the strength of the campaign. The activists agreed and changed their phrasing of events and actions, making their newsletters more neutral.

Several emailers urged the group to ask government for election observers. The activists looked into this and realized that the Netherlands had signed the Copenhagen Document which states that not just international observers are allowed to observe the elections but that domestic observers are also permitted.¹¹ The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) 'Election Observation Handbook' explains the task of observers: 'Domestic observers, both partisan and non-partisan observers, should be free to observe all stages of the election process before, during, and after election day. The tabulation of results should be visible and verifiable from polling-station level to all intermediate levels of election administration and finally to the national election authority' (OSCE 2005, p. 18). Nonetheless the Secretary of State

has refused the campaigners the right to become domestic election observers at the 2009 elections.¹²

When the WVSN campaigners decided on the first of November 2006 not to continue with the preliminary injunction against the state, they urged people to go and vote but also to hand in what they called a 'polite objection' by which citizens would voice their disagreement with the used voting computers, demanding that the government change the system. A lot of people reacted positively to this advice and wanted to know what the exact procedure for this official objection was. They suggested that the activists should put a description of the procedure and a model letter on their website for people to copy and sign and hand in on election day at the polling station. These procedures and example letters were indeed written and put on the website.

Before the WVSN campaign was launched in May 2006 there were only 12 out of 458 municipalities still using paper ballots. These were often very small villages where it had been considered too expensive to buy voting computers. These municipalities were scattered over the country and a couple of citizens emailed the activists with the idea of organising 'voting arrangements' to these villages, hiring buses and bringing people to the traditional polling stations. This was possible because in the Netherlands you can apply to vote in another city than your own. The original idea was welcomed enthusiastically by the activists and they added a page to the wiki explaining how to apply for a pass that would permit voting in another municipality. Schemes were constructed to get as many people as possible to vote in the traditional way. The media loved the idea of 'stemtoerisme' (voting tourism) and devoted a lot of attention to it. However, just before the November 2006 elections the Minister of Interior Affairs decided, after an investigating (set up as a result of the complaints made by the WVSN campaign), that one of the e-voting systems could not be used, adding another 20 municipalities to the list of 'traditional voting' locations including large cities like Amsterdam and Aalsmeer. This made it easier for people to get to these places and made organised bus trips unnecessary. A lot of people did make use of the opportunity to vote in the traditional manner, while others decided to vote electronically but handed in the 'polite objection' letters.

6. CONCLUSION

Communication technology is changing the ability of grassroots campaigns to carry out political organizing, and it becomes increasingly easy to reach an audience of fellow advocates,

politicians, the mass media, and the general public (Wall 2007; Chadwick 2006). Internet technology can be used in many ways by grassroots groups, such as: educating, building a community, lobbying, recruiting fellow advocates, facilitating mass media coverage, fund raising, increasing attendance at events and arranging logistical detail. It is now cheap, effective and quick to 'broadcast' information (such as newsletters, event notifications, surveys, media contact, action alerts) via websites or emails. This paper focused on the use of email in a single-issue campaign and has shown the increasing importance of email and mailing lists for activism.

The large amount of info emails sent by the public to the campaigners demonstrates that the activists were involved with an issue that coincided with the interests of citizens and that their actions met with the approval of a lot of people. As Ward (2001) has pointed out, there is a rise of alternative or new forms of participation. This suggests that overall levels of participation in western societies are not necessarily declining, but that the public is now more willing to support single issue campaigns and engage in unconventional forms of protest activity (ibid). While Oegema and Klandermans point out that 'Ideological commitment alone does not guarantee participation in concrete action' (1994: 704), the civic writing described in this paper is an example of micro-contributions by a politically informed and concerned citizenry that seeks and exercises new forms of voice and influence within the polity (Burt & Taylor 2008, p. 1049). Our research shows that from the activist's perspective, there were numerous benefits to be gained from receiving info emails from this large group of weak supporters. Although it took up a lot of their time, the activists found the direct communication with members of the public valuable for a number of reasons. By having to answer a lot of enquiries and explain the objectives of the campaign repeatedly the activists sharpened their own arguments and viewpoint. For one thing, it emphasised early on in the campaign that it was crucial to stick to one clear issue and not get distracted by other related matters (either concerned with elections in general or with transparency of other large IT systems). Receiving a lot of information helped the activists to enhance the content of the website and, as already stated in this paper, information is significant to a successful campaign (Meikle 2002). The tactical input by the public was considered very valuable. Not only because it gave the group ready-made new ideas or helped them develop new ideas, but also because it helped to clarify within the group why certain strategies or tactics were not applied. It would make the activists more aware of their own (sometimes unconscious) strategic decision-making. Because the info address made it easier for people to approach the activists for lectures and seminars, it gave the group extra opportunities to get their message

across to a larger audience. By answering all the incoming email the group established an open and approachable image which contributed to the success of the campaign. It would have been counterproductive for the activists if they had not responded to the emails.

In the WVSN campaign the activists were not the sole communicators publishing information on a website and sending newsletters. The info email address they supplied allowed weak supporters and opponents to return communication and to react to the communicator at relatively minimal cost (in time and money). The result is that there were opportunities for clarification, information provision or requests, and strategy input. Analysis of the info emails revealed that the address was used primarily as a vehicle for disseminating information and shows that - more than an interactive wiki¹³ - email in particular can enhance communication between campaigners and the general public. All the information sent by the public was added to the campaign website. But more than just information sharing, the info email list was able to contribute to the strategic discussions within the campaign. The emails provided a feedback mechanism on strategic decisions made by the activists and offered some original tactical advice. The importance of these micro-contributions from weak supporters is that small actions may lead to a greater sense of obligation (Garrett, 2006). This means that an individual who has contributed to a campaign (no matter how small-scale) is more likely to feel more committed to the issue.

Finally, and more broadly, the article's results suggest the general utility of civic writing via email for increasing the feeling of political efficacy among citizens. Email has created a new low-cost form of participation which ultimately might contribute to an upsurge in overall political participation (Garrett, 2006). The email address made it easy for supporters to manifest themselves and to articulate their views, which is a very important function. The study showed that there are many reasons to communicate with activists and that the emails can be categorised in high, medium and low levels of effort. Stotsky (1987) points out that expressing a political opinion in a mail gives citizens the feeling that they have done their civic duty. Citizens regard their mails as concrete symbols of political expression and meaningful participation in the political process. 'Citizens of all ages need to be convinced that they may be able to enhance the quality of their public officials and, ultimately, the conception they have of their own importance in the political process by their own initiative as writers' (Stotsky 1987, p. 408). But even acts as simple as providing the URLs to (or the PDFs of) interesting articles, or pointing out technical problems with the campaign website constituted a form of concrete participation and support.

The fact that emailers received personal replies showed them that what they have written has been read with care by someone and functions as bottom-up feedback into the political process, adding to the quality of democratic debate and experience. Consequently, this positive experience of sending emails to a grassroots campaign and getting serious feedback can increase the sense of internal efficacy for supporters. In addition to that, the fact that the campaign achieved its objectives and had such a successful outcome (i.e. the abolishment of non-transparent electronic voting computers in the Netherlands) must have further contributed to the weak supporters' belief that s/he can influence local and national government, and increased their sense of external efficacy. As a result it could make their commitment to future civic or political activity stronger (Kahne and Westheimer 2006; Eyler and Giles 1999).

While our research does not allow us to conclude whether or not the political writing between the public and the activists has actually *widened* or *deepened* political participation, it does show us is that the possibility for people to communicate with a grassroots campaign has been beneficial for both the civic writer and the activists. The WWSN case demonstrates that overall there still seems to be an interest and engagement in politics. The use of ICTs offers a positive potential to include weak supporters in alternative forms of protest and political decision making and might increase their level of support in future campaigns.

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Biography

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¹ In this paper we define political participation as both the conventional and unconventional activities (voting and elections, interest groups, social movement activity and protest behaviour) undertaken to influence political decision-making (O'Neill 2006, p. 5).

² Examples of concrete action and labour by the active supporters were delivering apple pies to 500 polling stations in Amsterdam, adding information to the wiki, and working on the hack of a voting computer.

³ The campaign website carried all the relevant legal and technical documents the group could get their hands on, newspaper articles dating back to 1993, and all the documents obtained with a number of extensive Freedom of Information Requests.

⁴ <http://www.wijvertrouwenstemcomputersniet.nl/Persberichten> [Accessed 4 July 2009]

⁵ An example of such shocking data was the blackmail threat from the head of the main e-voting supplier to the Dutch government. Emails revealed under Freedom of Information requests showed him threatening to cease all activity if one of the WVSN activists was appointed to an independent review committee. He then proposed that 'The ministry buys the shares of our company at a reasonable price, [...] and we will still cooperate during the next election (the Dutch 2007 provincial elections to be held March 7th).' He also wrote to Dutch election officials suggesting that the activist should be arrested and detained. He wrote: 'After all, his activities are destabilizing society and are as such comparable to terrorism. Preventive custody and a judicial investigation would have been very appropriate.' See also http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/03/17/foi_dutch/ [Accessed 4 July 2009]

⁶ Not only the info emails, but also the discussion list and the WVSN crew mails were dominated by men.

⁷ The activists also received numerous emails from journalists via the info mail, but these are not included in the analysis.

⁸ All the PDFs were scanned with OCR (Optical Character Recognition) software so that search engines like Google can index them.

⁹ <http://www.wijvertrouwenstemcomputersniet.nl/FAQ> [Accessed 4 July 2009]

¹⁰ 1 October 2000, Foundation vs. State; 11 November 2008, Foundation vs. Hoogheemraadschap van Rijnland.

¹¹ Copenhagen Document, online: <http://www.minelres.lv/osce/cope90e.htm> [Accessed 4 July 2009]

¹² Letter from Secretary of State drs. A.Th. B. Bijleveld-Schouten (23 May 2007) to Foundation. Online: http://www.wijvertrouwenstemcomputersniet.nl/images/c/cc/20070523-BZK_waarnemers.pdf [Accessed 4 July 2009]

¹³ Much of the hype surrounding the participatory possibilities of the Internet has centred on its interactive elements. In 2003 Ward et al. noted that interactive communication on political organisations' websites was however not particularly common (Ward et al. 2003: 659). This also seems to hold true for the WVSN wiki where only a very small group of people contributed a large amount of information.